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# The Wanderer

Peregrinations in Eldritch Regions

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By Timothy James Jarvis

A Creative Writing PhD Thesis

University of Glasgow

Faculty of Arts

April 2009

## **Abstract**

This being a creative, not critical, project, there is no overall thesis to summarize here, and I am loath to offer a synopsis of the fiction, for to do so would pre-empt plot turns. However, I feel it would be useful for me to give a brief outline of the intentions and aspirations I had for the material before I began to write it.

At the inception of this enterprise I had two main aims. First, I hoped to produce a creative writing thesis that, rather than consisting of separate critical and fictional components, was a ludic interweaving of theory and invention. To this end, I decided to structure the work as a kind of detournement of the annotated critical edition, situating a critical apparatus around my core work of fiction.

Second, I wanted to examine the contestational potential of a literary mode often, sometimes correctly, maligned as a conservative genre – horror fiction. However, I did not want to follow the template of a number of transgressive horrors, which is simply to depict reason overthrown by a dark and terrible other, but wished to reappraise the overlooked possibilities of the form. I had no idea what these might be, but hoped to uncover them in the process of writing my thesis. In the event the project departed from the horror schema, but it remained a fundamental model, the tingling spine of the piece.

It was in the course of carrying out my second intention I came up against the central problem of the composition of this thesis. I became convinced horror is not just an amalgam of terror and revulsion, as dictionary definitions would have it, but must also include a component of the uncanny. While it is not easy to produce the first two emotional responses, it is at least obvious what means should be employed. The uncanny, however, is more elusive, and I had no clear idea how I might attempt to give rise to it. I decided instead to proceed by

intuition and the emulation of works that had produced an uncanny feeling in me. While writing it seemed to me I was producing a text capable of eliciting at least a faint thrill of strangeness, though I had no idea how I was doing so, and it was not until I was nearing the end of the project I realised what my unconscious method had been.

Let me explain.

On the 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2008, while in the midst of editing this thesis, I was reading, for respite from my own work, Iain Sinclair's novel *Dining on Stones* (2004), when I came upon the following passage:

My wild card is the little-known novel *More Things in Heaven* by Walter Owen. Owen [...] lived for a time in Buenos Aires. He produced a sequence, linked narratives involving spontaneous combustion and a cursed manuscript, that seems in some ways to prefigure Borges (with a dash of M.R. James). Owen's book, difficult to find, has itself become a talisman, possession (unless it can be passed on to an unsuspecting recipient) conferring malfate, paranoid delusions, death. I rid myself of my original copy, but still have the second – which arrived, anonymously, as a barter against a bad debt. (Sinclair, 2005, p.407)

I was intrigued – both Borges and M.R. James had been reference points for me when composing my novel; furthermore, my book was also a sequence of linked narratives, and involved a cursed manuscript.

In *Dining on Stones*, the narrator, Andrew Norton, Sinclair's recurrent alter ego, goes on to quote some sections from '*More Things in Heaven...*' (1947). Reading these, I noted a further similarity to my novel. Norton reproduces the following quotation from Owen's book, originally, in context, written by the narrator, 'gradually I found the conviction forming in my mind that the story they unfolded was not fiction but a narrative of factual events' – the crux of my tale comes at a point when one of its characters wonders whether a manuscript, which

comprises the bulk of the book, is a work of the imagination, or a faithful recording of incredible and dreadful events (Owen, 1947, p.12).

Therefore, undeterred by Sinclair's claims of malign influence, on my next visit to the British Library, I ordered '*More Things in Heaven...*'. On receiving it, a couple of days later – not being much in demand it was held in the library's off-site depository in Boston Spa, Yorkshire – I felt a frisson on opening the book and reading the first sentence: 'On the 14<sup>th</sup> July 1935 Mr Cornelius Letherbotham, an English gentleman resident in Buenos Aires, died under extraordinary and distressing circumstances,' (Owen, 1947, p.9). The reason I shuddered then will become clear on perusing the first paragraph of my novel:

On the 13<sup>th</sup> March 2005, the author Simon Peterkin, a hack horror writer, read only by obsessive fans of the genre, went missing. He had few friends and had become estranged from his only living relatives, a brother and sister. Therefore, it is doubtful his disappearance would have come to general notice, had it not been for the singular circumstances surrounding it.

Gripped by horrible fascination, I read on. '*More Things in Heaven...*' is a strange, difficult, and at times abstruse work, filled with occult erudition and containing a number of virtuoso pastiches of historical documents. In many ways it is a novel that pre-empted the literary styles of later, postmodernist writers; with its linked tales, mysticism, and overarching narrative about a hermetic sect of 'Magi' under whose auspices human civilisation is directed, it is reminiscent of a work by Umberto Eco, or Thomas Pynchon. It is certainly a very enjoyable book. It is not surprising it did not find, and has never found, a general readership, however, for it contains a great number of esoteric terms and archaisms, its plot is incoherent to the extent that suspense is vitiated utterly, and it has a fustian quality reminiscent of the bombast of turn-of-the-twentieth-century mystics, and fustiness redolent of arcane impenetrable texts. And of course there are those tales of it 'conferring malfate, paranoid delusions, death...'

As I perused '*More Things in Heaven...*', and researched Owen's life, more and more coincidences occurred to me. A character in my novel quotes the line from Shakespeare from which Owen took his title. Though Owen lived most of his life in Uruguay, he was born and educated in Glasgow; Glasgow University was the institute at which I chose to study for my doctorate. At one point in my novel the character producing the critical apparatus, James Anderson, writes in a footnote of his coming upon a book that has a strange resonance with the manuscript he is editing – an experience that mirrors mine in discovering '*More Things in Heaven...*'. In the section of my thesis that purports to be an extract from the work Anderson discovers, reference is made to the US poet Robert W. Service, who attended the same school in Glasgow, Hillhead High, as Owen, a mere ten years before him. A further resonance is that Owen's protagonist, after an encounter with some eldritch thing, finds his right arm is afflicted:

A strange feature of my injuries was the condition of my right arm and hand. The sleeves of my shirt and jacket had completely disappeared, leaving my arm bare to the shoulder, and the arm itself was bloodless and shrivelled as if by prolonged immersion in water. (Owen, 1947, p.309)

In my novel, a character, after blundering into and touching with his outstretched hand some foul entities in a cavern beneath the Glasgow Necropolis, suffers a very similar affliction: 'Over the next few days his [right] arm grew more enfeebled, took on a necrotic hue, and began to stink of rottenness.'

After reading '*More Things in Heaven...*' and noting all these correspondences, I returned to *Dining on Stones* to look again at Sinclair's evocation of Owen's novel, and read, with vague horror, another line Norton quotes from it: 'I was struck by the coincidence, if indeed it was a coincidence and not a clue to some hidden connection,' (Owen, 1947, p.12).

Of course, I knew the coincidences between my novel and Owen's were mere coincidences, but I still felt the frisson such correspondences can produce. Pondering this, I realised the sensation I was experiencing was one I had striven to engender with my novel's multiple frames, paratexts, and internal referentiality. This led me to muse on why I should have wished to do so, and to reconsider some of the notions that had been much in my mind as I was composing the thesis. I realised then it was through an attempt to produce in the reader a sense of fated and ominous connections that I had tried to engender the uncanny.

To conclude this abstract, I want to return to the question of the overlooked potential of the horror form. It is my belief works in the mode have the power to bring home to the reader the fact that, in a world in which the events of history are regurgitated by the media as palatable fictionalized morsels, the real has not lost any of its terror, or brutality. Readers thus made to feel anew a sense of peril will, it is to be hoped, adopt a more interrogative stance towards that which they are told. Horror therefore possesses a valuable ethical function.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank, first of all, my supervisors, Willy Maley and Andrew Radford, without whose continued encouragement and interest this project could not have been seen to fruition. Their insight, erudition, and sensitive and inspired creative and editorial suggestions have shaped this thesis from its inception to its completion. Rob Maslen has also provided valuable, generous, and perceptive comments and advice on a number of sections of this work.

Without the tolerant guidance and support of Sarah Baxter and my family, Susan, Dan, Jenny, and Adam Jarvis, I would have faltered many times under the weight of self-doubt and frustration; I am furthermore indebted to Sarah for taking the evocative photographs included in the thesis and to Susan for her sterling proofreading.

Funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council enabled me to embark upon this PhD; I am extremely grateful for the opportunity this grant afforded me. My research has been greatly facilitated by the aid of the staff of Glasgow University Library and the British Library, for which many thanks are due. Many thanks also go to the administrative staff of Glasgow University's Department of English Literature and Faculty of Arts, whose patient and helpful responses to queries have been much appreciated.

I would also like to thank Ali Smith and Andrew Motion, who kindly wrote my references at the outset of this process, and who have both, in the past, helped me greatly, by fostering my writing. Without the friendship, and intellectual and creative input of William Curnow, Bas Groes, and Neil Stewart, this project would have foundered at an early stage. I am also very grateful to Jill, Mike, and Alison Baxter, Douglas Cowie, Paul Crosby, Hannah Dickson, Ruben Hale, Sarah Harrop, Raphael Hoermann, Eugene de Klerk, Vanessa and



Adrian Legoux, Neel Mukherjee, Alan Smith, Tom Startup, David Stewart, Michael Truswell, Georgina Young and many others, for friendship and inspiration.

Many heartfelt thanks to all,

Tim Jarvis

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To whom it may concern,

I am an editor at a small publishing house whose output largely consists of pulp thriller, horror, and romantic fiction, though we produce a smattering of cultural studies material, a few volumes of literary criticism, and some works of erotica.

As previously discussed, I am submitting the entirety of the following manuscript, including my explanatory preface, as the PhD thesis of James Mark Anderson. The young man's mother stipulated I do so as a condition of her granting me the right to publish the document, perhaps believing my endorsement might cast it in a good light, though why she might have thought this, I cannot say.

Though I know little about such things, I am doubtful whether, in truth, this material constitutes a completed doctorate, especially since the vast majority of it was not written, only edited, by James. However, I feel, in spite of my doubts, it is my duty to comply with the wishes of James's distraught mother. He has been missing since the 5<sup>th</sup> March 2007, and she believes it unlikely he will now return to finish work on his thesis. She feels it will alleviate her sorrow somewhat to know that his work has been handed in for assessment. Furthermore, understandably, she wishes to close that chapter of her life.

One final thing. I wrote my pre-amble as if for an on-sale edition of *The Wanderer*, but this was perhaps premature of me, for the book may never have a print-run; I have not been able yet to convince my colleagues it is worthy of publication. However, though their objections on both aesthetic and commercial grounds are, I must own, in many ways convincing, I still believe it has something to offer the connoisseur of the weird and grotesque.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.

Yours faithfully,

Tim Jarvis

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Simon Peterkin

# The Wanderer

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*With an Introduction and Notes by*

James Anderson

*Edited by*

Tim Jarvis

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## **Editor's Foreword**

On the 13<sup>th</sup> March 2005, the author Simon Peterkin, a hack horror writer, read only by obsessive fans of the genre, went missing. He had few friends and had become estranged from his only living relatives, a brother and sister. Therefore, it is doubtful his disappearance would have come to general notice, had it not been for the singular circumstances surrounding it.

Residents of the north London mansion block in which he had lived for a number of years gave odd testimonies. Shortly after he was seen entering his flat for the last time, which was at about seven o' clock in the evening of the date mentioned, the sounds of a scuffle and an awful howling were heard. Concerned, his neighbours called for the building porter. When, a mere four minutes later, this elderly Scotsman, a retired police officer, and considered a reliable witness, opened Peterkin's front door with his master key and entered the apartment, he found no one within.

There was no sign of violence, and none of Peterkin's possessions were missing, as far as could be ascertained. However, there were two uncanny details. The first was a cigarette smouldering in an old, tortoiseshell Bakelite ashtray on the desk in the study, which looked as if it had been lit, put down, but not smoked, for, though it was burnt down almost to the filter, the friable ash still held the shape of the original paper-rolled tobacco. Innocuous enough, but rendered eerie by the situation. The second thing was subsequently discovered by police officers investigating the disappearance. A stench attracted their attention to it; a pool of vomit in the wardrobe in Peterkin's bedroom.

The sleight by which the vanishing was effected – whether by Peterkin himself, or by others who bore him ill – has been the subject of much subsequent speculation, but nothing can be known for certain.

Although it is unlikely Peterkin's disappearance would have attracted any attention at all had it not been for its atmosphere of the weird, it is probable this strangeness alone would have only been sufficient to garner a modicum of tabloid coverage – the fact the story made some front pages must be put down to another cause. It seems there are bitter and memorious men and women working for the daily newspapers who took vicious pleasure in speculating on the possibility that Peterkin had been abducted by a crazed fan, claiming he had fled some sordid disgrace, asserting it was an elaborate and desperate publicity stunt, or pronouncing him dead. These were journalists perhaps still rankling over a successful set of lawsuits he had brought nearly 20 years previously. The reportage was certainly edged with glee.

As a small imprint of this publishing house, Ormolu Press, had published the vast majority of his work, and, furthermore, he had signed a contract with another of our offshoots, Penny Bloods, to produce a pulp horror novella – a grisly tale of an ancient evil reawakened by body snatchers, set in the late-Georgian period – a number of effects pertaining to Peterkin's writing were given over to us following the inquest. Among these, amid various ideas and sketches, was uncovered a ring-bound manuscript of some length. The first fifty pages or so were a computer printout which appeared to consist of the, evidently carelessly written, opening chapters of the commissioned book, *The Resurrection*. The remainder was type-written, and crumpled, stained, and otherwise in a very poor condition. It appeared to be a complete draft of a novel entitled *The Wanderer*. Not even James Anderson, a PhD student writing a thesis on Peterkin's work and its place in the horror canon, who had been working as the author's amanuensis for the eighteen months prior to his disappearance, had had any inkling he had been writing this book.

As *The Resurrection* was in no state to be published, there was general agreement here that, in order to recoup some of the advance paid Peterkin, this other work, unless incomplete, or incomprehensible, should be put out in its stead. It was felt that, almost regardless of its



quality, Peterkin's core fans could be relied upon to buy it, and that the weird circumstances surrounding his vanishing could be capitalized upon to bolster sales.

I was given the task of reading *The Wanderer*. However, before I had had a chance to do more than skim the first few chapters, it emerged that, while Peterkin had left in his will all his property and money, including any future royalties, to his brother and sister, he had bequeathed his drafts, notes, and so forth – essentially the entirety of his unpublished literary output – to the young man, Anderson. We urged Anderson to allow us to publish *The Wanderer*, but he refused, stating that he wished to peruse it first; we were legally obliged to pass it to him.

After going through it he came back to us, stating that he would permit us to put the book out, but only on certain conditions. These were simply that he be allowed to prepare a revised and edited version of the text. We had no choice but to capitulate.

Two years passed, during which time, especially as interest in Peterkin's writing and disappearance rapidly waned, I pestered Anderson often for the manuscript. For the first eighteen months, when I spoke to him, he seemed sane enough, though was reluctant to part with the document, asking for more time to get it ready. Towards the end of the period, however, he began to show signs of having developed an obsessive horror of the thing, rambling incoherently, calling it 'fiendish', and 'diabolical', even going so far as to claim that it had not been composed by Peterkin at all, but by an unknown person, or group of people, intent on persecuting him. This had the effect of making me more and more impatient to read it in its entirety. In retrospect, I regret not taking action with regard to these delusions, but I had no reason to suspect they were anything other than the harmless fantasies of an obsessive pulp fan.

Then, on the 5<sup>th</sup> March, 2007, I picked up the phone and dialled Anderson's number with the intention of haranguing him once again about the Peterkin narrative. To my surprise a woman answered. It emerged she was the young man's mother. When I explained why I was

calling she broke down in tears. Her son, she said, had been acting strangely, and his odd behaviour had culminated in his going missing, with not a word to friends or family. She was only too glad to get rid of *The Wanderer* manuscript, for she found it hateful: the strain of working on it, she was certain, was what had unbalanced her son. She sent me everything pertaining to it she could find in Anderson's flat.

When her package arrived, I opened it full of anticipation. I was looking forward to finally reading *The Wanderer* as a whole. It was disappointing, therefore, to find the parcel did not contain the original manuscript, but rather a computer printout of a copy, presumably typed-up by Anderson. However, from my memory of what I had previously glanced over, it seemed that, while he had lightly edited and corrected Peterkin's draft, Anderson had left the substance of the novel untouched. Of course, it is difficult for me to estimate the precise extent of his interventions, for I only skimmed the first few sections of the original. Still I would guess, in particular from a number of significant problems with narrative structure, he did not do much in the way of major revision during the two years he was working on *The Wanderer*. Instead, it appears he spent his time producing annotations, a biography of Peterkin, an analysis of the novel, a chronology of Peterkin's life, and a bibliography of further reading. These were incorporated into the version I received. I am unsure what Anderson's intention in producing this critical apparatus was – *The Wanderer* is not important, difficult, or esoteric enough to warrant one. I wonder whether he hoped to bring to the attention of a reading public what he saw as the literary dimensions of the novel. But, by the time he had finished work on his marginalia – which would seem to have been not long before his disappearance – he had clearly abandoned this rationale: at some point he had begun to set down, in the midst of his more rational critical discussions, the tormenting fears certain aspects of the manuscript had given rise to in him.

As well as the printout, the package contained: a photocopy of a short tale, apparently taken from a collection discovered by Anderson, that has resonances with the novel, an

original of which I have been unable to locate; an essay, supposedly written by Peterkin, entitled ‘A Treatise on Horror’, to which Anderson refers, a number of times, in his introduction; a list, compiled by Anderson, the accuracy of which I cannot vouch for, of all the books on the bookshelves of Peterkin’s study at the time of his disappearance, and other miscellanea; and a number of photographs, labelled on the back, which are of locations featured in *The Wanderer*, pictures I assume to have been taken by Peterkin while he was researching the novel and found by Anderson among his effects. I have chosen, in producing this edition, to place all this material in appendices.

When I later contacted Anderson’s mother, to ask about the whereabouts of the original manuscript, and of the notebooks Anderson refers to in a footnote to his introduction, she said she had sent me everything she had found and if there had been anything else it had clearly vanished along with him.

After reading all the material, I was desirous to publish the thing in its entirety, both Peterkin’s novel and Anderson’s notes, introduction, and the other disjecta membra he had assembled. Indeed, that is what is presented here. To my mind Anderson’s material constitutes an interesting narrative of its own.

I am indebted to James Anderson’s mother, Jane Anderson, for letting me reproduce his work, and must acknowledge that she has only acquiesced to my petitions, despite her initial reservations, because she feels her son’s critical apparatus constitutes a tragic caution against certain obsessions that can unbalance the mind.

For my part, I leave it up to the reader to decide what nature of tale is told by Anderson’s marginalia, and indeed by *The Wanderer* text itself. I can only warn that I have not slept easily since reading them.

### A Note on the Text

Anderson's annotations are indicated by Arabic numerals, and can be found at the end of the text. The marginal scrawl he ascribes to Peterkin, appears here as it does on the printout Jane Anderson sent me: a footnote indicated by Roman numerals. The only evidence this gloss, and the three erasures and interpolations referred to by Anderson existed is his testimony; during my brief examination of *The Wanderer* manuscript, I did not notice them.

On the page following this, Anderson's material begins. Infrequent editorial insertions will be clearly identified by the word '*Editor*' and indicated by square brackets. No chronological progression should be assumed with regards to Anderson's critical apparatus; in fact, as the reader will see, it would appear that it was produced piecemeal, and in radically variable states of mind.

Typographical errors, and obvious solecisms, have been corrected in both Peterkin's novel and Anderson's apparatus, though the occasionally tortuous syntax of the former has been left intact, since it seems to have been part of the design of the work, and was, in any case, a feature of Peterkin's prose.

*Tim Jarvis*

## Introduction

Uncannily, the circumstances of Simon Peterkin's disappearance on the 13<sup>th</sup> March 2005, were strongly redolent of the tales of horror he had spent the best part of his life writing. On the evening of that day eldritch howls and the noise of a struggle were heard coming from the Highgate flat in which he had lived for just over ten years. The mansion block's porter was alerted by concerned neighbours. On unlocking the door of the apartment and entering, he found it empty. The only obvious sign of anything untoward was a cigarette, burned most of the way down, reeking in an ashtray on the desk in the study. Peterkin had never smoked – the ashtray had only been used to hold paperclips.

Then, about an hour later, a more loathsome discovery was made by the two police officers assigned to respond to the porter's call to the emergency services. A foul smell emanating from the wardrobe in Peterkin's bedroom prompted them to open the door. Upon doing so they found someone or something had recently thrown up in there; the shoes and belts heaped untidily on its floor were spattered with vomit. The cabinet was big, easily large enough to hold a man, and it has been suggested Peterkin was hidden inside while the porter made his cursory search of the flat, then stole out once it was vacated. However, this theory can be given little credence – if Peterkin effected his vanishing by sleight, it was not by such a crude trick as this, for the porter, whose testimony is considered reliable, remained outside the door until the police arrived. Besides, even if the porter had, for some reason, lied – had perhaps been paid off – the writer could not have passed through the mansion block without being captured on one of the building's many security cameras, or spotted by one of the other residents, many of whom, curious, were milling about in the lobby, and on the stairs and landings. It is also impossible that Peterkin could have left his apartment through one of its

windows, as some have suggested, for it is on the fourth floor, and there is no external fire escape, or anything of the like. The idea he shinned down a drainpipe is absurd – he was a sixty year old man, who had long suffered from stiff and painful joints; it would have been an arduous enough descent for a young fit person.

It would seem Peterkin simply ceased to be, slipped out of existence, or passed into some other realm of being. That this has been the fate of several characters in his novels and short stories has kindled speculation the disappearance was staged.<sup>1</sup> Malicious voices in some sectors of the press have asserted that Peterkin contrived his disappearance in a desperate attempt to reach a popular audience. This would seem unlikely. Though his books did not sell well, they had a loyal following. Besides, he did not crave the notice of the mainstream, had happily toiled for nearly forty years in relative obscurity, and avowedly relished the marginal status which allowed him to indulge his creative whims and refine his craft, rather than be slave to the tyranny of sales figures. Furthermore, the notion that he would, for mere fame, abandon a sister and brother to whom he was very attached and friends whose company he often kept is absurd. Finally, he had, just before he vanished so enigmatically, completed a major writing project, which, had the disappearance been a hoax designed to garner publicity, he would surely have seen into print first. It was a work of fiction whose gestation he had concealed even from those closest to him. It is this novel that is offered to the reader here, for the first time.

Other theories, that Peterkin ran from debts or was fleeing disgrace are equally spurious: his earnings from writing, though not large, kept him solvent – for he was a man of simple tastes and circumspect expenditure – and, despite what some bitter elements of the press have intimated, his personal life was without stain.

It would thus seem extremely doubtful that the whole thing was a sham set up by Peterkin. And yet, it must also be admitted that there seems no other way to account for it. Supernatural explanations put forward in a number of fan publications must be discounted.

Lengthy police enquiries have drawn a blank. Perhaps the disappearance will forever remain obscure. Like the best horror fictions, Peterkin's life was a relatively ordinary story that ended with an insoluble and shocking crux.

This novel, *The Wanderer*, his legacy, offers no illumination of the enigma. Neither does it elucidate the meaning of his life's endeavours, nor attain the pitch of his best work. What it does reveal, however, is a glimpse of the direction in which his reflections upon his craft might have taken him in the future. It is in this spirit it is offered to the public; as an awkward, discomfiting, but interesting failure.

## **Biography**

Simon Peterkin was born on the 30th April 1945 in Bedford, to Edward and Dora Peterkin (née Canning). Edward had been invalided out of the armed services in 1941, by a piece of shrapnel that damaged the ligaments of his right knee, and taken the position of headmaster at a small village school. Until the end of the war in Europe, the month previously, Dora had been a Wren working as a telephonist on the switchboards of the military exchange in the Tunnels beneath Dover Castle. Peterkin was apparently conceived while she was on leave in October 1944. This caused a small scandal for Dora and Edward were not married until December of that year.<sup>2</sup>

According to his own account, Peterkin's early years were relatively uneventful and happy – a circumstance he described as 'probably inimical to [his] chosen trade as a purveyor of fictions of horror,' (2000b, pp.39-40). He had two younger siblings, a sister and a brother, his playfellows in childhood, with whom he stayed in regular contact until the day of his disappearance.

Peterkin's family remained in Bedfordshire throughout his childhood and adolescence. He attended local schools. After completing his A-Levels he worked for two years as a

teaching assistant in his father's school. In 1965, at the age of 20, he left home to begin a Bachelor of Arts degree in English and American literature at the newly inaugurated Warwick University. He studied at the university for three years, during which time he lived in Leamington Spa. These were very happy years. It was in this period that he made his first forays into writing, composing a number of short fictions in an experimental vein, the drafts of most of which he subsequently discarded. One, however, was published: in 1967, in *Phantastic Realms*, a small-circulation magazine with a submission policy based on that espoused by Michael Moorcock in his editorship of *New Worlds*.<sup>3</sup> Reading it today, the story seems desultory, but it can be easily imagined it would have fitted well with the tenor of the age. It is an existential Western entitled 'The Murder of Peter Crow', and incorporates Buddhist precepts absorbed second-hand from the Beats. The general impression is of a story written counter to the author's inclinations in an effort to find favour, and in that aim it appears to have failed.<sup>4</sup> It does, however, contain the seeds of the grotesquery and lexical weirdness that was to mark Peterkin's later work.

On leaving university in 1968, he moved to London, harbouring dreams of a career in writing. He rented a bedsit in Tufnell Park. He quickly became disillusioned, however. His increasingly idiosyncratic and punctilious fictions met with the scorn of his contemporaries – howls of derision often accompanying his readings in the fuggy backrooms of pubs patronised by London's avant-garde – and he learnt, one miserable night at a party in Soho, when he returned unexpectedly, having forgotten his umbrella, that even the few among them whom he counted as friends, ridiculed him behind his back. Moreover, he was not temperamentally suited to the era, for though he loved its music and subscribed to some of the tenets of its radical ideologies, he was somewhat staid and reluctant to experiment with psychedelic drugs.

Then, in early 1969, following a spate of particularly caustic rebuffs from magazines, he decided to abandon writing, and began training as a social worker. He severed ties with most of the people he had met in London up to that point, stopped frequenting the haunts of the



literary scene, and threw himself into his work. When he qualified in 1971, he chose to specialise in mental health. He was based in offices in the psychiatric wing of St Pancras Hospital, though his role mostly consisted of conducting home visits, in the borough of Camden, with patients suffering from mild disorders. In 1972 another young social worker joined the team, Anne Metcalf. She and Peterkin began to spend a lot of time in each other's company; a year later, in October 1973, Peterkin proposed and was accepted. They were married in the summer of 1974.

Anne moved in to Peterkin's flat. Shortly afterwards, she was clearing out an old filing cabinet and came across a copy of the issue of *Phantastic Realms* in which 'The Murder of Peter Crow' had been published. Intrigued, she questioned Peterkin about it. He confided his former literary ambitions to her, and she encouraged him to take up writing again. He began working, in the evenings and at weekends, on the novel that was to become *The Changeling* (1981).

In March 1975 Anne gave birth to a son, Oscar. His parents doted on him. In the essay 'The Juggernaut' (1987), Peterkin was to describe the years of Oscar's infancy as 'the happiest times [he had] ever known,' (2000d, p.138).

Peterkin's first novel took four years to complete, but in October 1978 it was finished, under the provisional title, *The Sign of the Black Raven*. Encouragement from family and friends persuaded him to send the book out to literary agents. Some never responded, others sent, mostly polite, letters of rejection. But Peterkin did not let himself be discouraged, and persevered. In March 1979 he received a reply from an agent, Oswald Straker, who wished to take him on as a client.<sup>5</sup> He recommended Peterkin make a few changes, chief among which was the alteration of the title to *The Changeling* (he felt it was 'punchier' than the original), and an increased emphasis on the gruesome. In November 1979, it was sold to the small Ormolu Press and, following a lengthy editing process, was published in January 1981. Though Ormolu did not have the resources for much publicity, on the back of positive

reviews in horror journals it sold tolerably well. It is a tale imbued with supernatural terror. The narrative follows the researches of a late-nineteenth-century historian into a series of murders that took place during the St Bartholomew fair of 1587. Its first paragraph, a musty pastiche of an advertising bill discovered by the protagonist, set the antic tone for Peterkin's subsequent career, and heralded the arrival of a different kind of horror writer:

At the next Door to the Sign of the *Black Raven* in *West Smithfield* during the Fair, is to be shewn (by her Majesties Order) an Horrible and Prodigious Sight, a Fairy Child, chang'd in the Nurling for an Infant born in *Oxford* of the body of *Rebecca Cartwright*. Though now Aged nine Years and more, it scarce exceeds the bignefs of a Cat, but is grave in Demeanour and learn'd in Discourse, as if it were Threescore Years old. It divines the Future with Biblical Lots, and its Prognostications are exceeding accurate in all Particulars. By setting it against the Sun, or holding Candles behind it, the whole Anatomy of the Body may be seen. It is quiet, but when Fear moves it, it wails like a Mandrake. It consumes no Victuals, save for a quart of Rooster blood it drinks down twice each day. It hath never been shewn, save to some Persons of Quality. If any Person has a desire to see it at their own Houses, we are ready to wait upon them any Hour of the Day. (1981, p.7)

The plaudits *The Changeling* received, and the advance he was paid for it persuaded Peterkin to leave his job and write full-time. He began work on *Ilona Joo*, a grisly fictional account of the life of the Blood Countess Erzsébet Báthory's wet nurse, accomplice in the infamous murders, and alleged witch. He completed it in May 1983.

Three months later his life was blighted by a terrible tragedy. He, Anne, and Oscar were returning early in the morning from a holiday in France, when, on the outskirts of Dover, a lorry ploughed into their car. The trucker had fallen asleep at the wheel. Both Anne, who was driving, and Oscar were killed instantly. Peterkin, in the front passenger seat, furthest from the impact, was stunned, but unharmed. Jack-knifing, then overturning, the container spilled its cargo of pig carcasses across the tarmac. The driver, who had not been injured in the

collision, got down from his cab, dragged Peterkin from the twisted wreck of the car, and carried him over to the verge. The lorry's engine ignited, and both vehicles were engulfed by flames.

Four years later, Peterkin wrote a profoundly moving account of the accident in 'The Juggernaut'. In it he records how, in the weeks immediately following the crash, he 'found solace in the intellectual contemplation of the dreadful thing that ha[d] befallen [him],' (Peterkin, 2000d, p.145). He pored over the books in his library seeking resonances. Two, he wrote, struck him as particularly apt. The first was the story St Mark the evangelist tells of the man in the country of the Gadarenes who is possessed by a multitude of violent, unclean spirits, and who, when asked his name, answers, 'My name is Legion, for we are many.' He is cured when Christ commands the demons leave his body and enter a herd of swine feeding nearby. These pigs, numbering some two thousand, then, deranged, cast themselves off a cliff and drown. This strange tale of senseless waste, its tone so out of keeping with the general tenor of the New Testament, called to Peterkin's mind the butchered carcasses that had been strewn across the road on the night of the accident. He remembered that several had lain, very near the burning vehicles, and pondered, morbidly, whether the reek of broiling pork masked that of another flesh charring.

The second pertinent passage was a scene from Charles Robert Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820) in which the infernal Melmoth, wishing to foster an aversion to religion in the innocent Immalee, gives her a telescope in order that she might see the barbarous acts of worship of several Eastern creeds.<sup>6</sup> These include rites associated with the Hindu deity Krishna in his guise as Jagannâth (Lord of the Universe). Believers are depicted in the novel immolating themselves, either by lying down in the path of 'the triumphal car, support[ing] the inshrined image of Juggernaut,' or by spilling their own blood in its wake.<sup>7</sup>

As the procession moved on, sparkling amid desolation, and triumphant amid death, multitudes rushed forward from time to time, to prostrate themselves under the

wheels of the enormous machine, which crushed them to atoms in a moment, and passed on; – others ‘cut themselves with knives and lancets after their manner,’ and not believing themselves worthy to perish beneath the wheels of the idol’s chariot, sought to propitiate him by dying the tracks of those wheels with their blood. (Maturin, 2000, pp.325, 326)

Peterkin’s essay is a tacit excoriation of capitalist ideology – of the sacrifices it demands, the pernicious way it masquerades as a natural ‘truth’, and the blind faith of its adherents. It is a theme that came to pervade his later novels. While it may be true, as James Halloran argues, in his article ‘The Vanishing’ (2005), that ‘Peterkin was not an overtly political writer,’ questions about ideology were at the core of his texts (p.45).

Peterkin’s family were incredibly supportive of him during the months immediately following his bereavement. With their succour, he pulled through that ‘black time’ (Peterkin, 2000d, p.180).

In October 1984 *Ilona Joo* was published. Initially it received little attention, and might well have marked the end of Peterkin’s career, had a tabloid journalist not come across it and written a bitter denunciation of it:

It is clear to me that the writer of this book [the hack averred] is a sexual deviant.

The relish with which he depicts the eroticised murders of young women is truly vile.

For a brief time, Peterkin’s supposed turpitude was subject of censure from many quarters of the press. Interest in the novel was revived, but this came at a cost.

Peterkin was set upon in the street and beaten unconscious by an unidentified assailant. He spent two weeks in hospital recovering from the assault. On his discharge he began to explore legal avenues of compensation, and decided to sue several newspapers, who had published his photograph and branded him a dangerous deviant, for damages. In January 1985 proceedings were initiated; the case went to court, and Peterkin won. The amounts he was

awarded were not insubstantial, though it was, as he writes in 'Blood Feud', 'primarily a matter of principle,' (2000b, p.40).

Peterkin published five novels, two collections of short stories, and one collection of non-fiction between 1985 and his disappearance.<sup>8</sup> His life was comfortable and largely without incident, though the loss of his wife and child remained a constant sadness, and he was devastated by the deaths of his mother and father, within a few months of each other, in 2003. Apart from three years, 1991-1994, during which he resided in Glasgow, he lived in London.

Finally, a word about Peterkin's craft. He was not an astute observer of society or individual psychology, a master of suspense, or a diabolical wielder of the dreadful and grotesque. His great facility was for sounding the antic resonances of everyday objects and experiences. His terrors are never entities from some unfathomable beyond.<sup>9</sup> They are quite often banal, diurnal things grown alterior and loathsome. A central figure of Peterkin's oeuvre is the transgression of boundaries between the quotidian and the fantastic.

It has been argued that there is an ideological component to Peterkin's writings. However, readers should be wary of strict allegorical interpretations of his works. His maxim, which he had pinned up on a corkboard above his desk, was the following quotation taken from a letter written by Maturin to Walter Scott:

I have no power of affecting, no hopes of instructing, no play or other production of mine will ever draw a tear from the eye, or teach a lesson to the Heart, so I wish they would let me do what I am good for, sit down by my magic Cauldron, mix my dark ingredients, see the bubbles work, and the spirits rise, and by the pale and mystic light, I might show them "the best of my delights". (Maturin cited in Sage, 2000, p.viii)

A last warning: Peterkin's writings have a playful sense of macabre absurdity. It would be a mistake to think that he took his creations too seriously.

## A Discussion of the Text

The remainder of this introduction will be given over to a discussion of the salient features of *The Wanderer*. Critical forewords to literary texts are perilous productions, for their writers must be like tightrope walkers, striking a balance between two unsatisfactory positions: the essay that does not provide sufficient analysis, a pointless discussion which merely skates on the surface of the work; and the in-depth exploration which, though offering the reader orientation and guidance, also reveals turns and plot developments that should take him or her by surprise. In the case of horror tales, the story is particularly susceptible to vitiation by anticipation, for, in order to generate its emotional impact, it relies on the unexpected. As a consequence, it is generally safest not to give fictions of fear prefaces.

However, because *The Wanderer* is, to a degree, an expression in encrypted fictional form of Peterkin's musings on his craft and on the nature of being, certain facets of it might remain opaque for some without a modicum of clarification. This is true even for those already familiar with horror literature in general, and even with Peterkin's work in particular, for his ideas had grown increasingly idiosyncratic; his wanderings outside traditional genre borders (the beginnings of which can be seen in the two novels preceding his disappearance, *Death and the Labyrinth* (1999) and *Dust* (2003)), which were inspired, to a significant degree, by his engagements with criticism and theory, had, by *The Wanderer*, become a flight from that terrain. This is, in part, the difficulty of the book – it was written by an author on the run in regions unknown. As would be expected from such a novel, it is fragmentary, and many of its scenes are hurriedly composed. Also, Peterkin becomes a welcher, promising horror, then defaulting on that promise. The main pleasure of the novel, therefore, is that of excavating his ideas.

As a consequence, then, an introduction might be of value in this case. However, it is difficult to conceive of one that would provide sufficient clarification while avoiding giving

too much away, spoiling the reader's pleasure. Besides, the archaeology can be done retrospectively without any loss of significance – after an initial read through of *The Wanderer* the reader can return to it to decipher its more opaque notions. Therefore, the following analysis is offered as an aid to the reader, with the caveat that, because it reveals details of the plot in advance, it is best treated not as a preface, but an afterword, to be perused subsequent to a complete reading of the novel.

There is another source a puzzled reader might find offers some elucidation, and which will be extensively referred to in the subsequent discussion. In the months prior to his disappearance Peterkin wrote a critical piece he called 'A Treatise on Horror'. It is part essay, part manifesto. Many of the conceits expressed in it figure, transmuted into fiction, as recurring motifs of *The Wanderer*. It is included at the end of this volume [as Appendix II – *Editor*].

*The reader is advised that the following discussion contains analysis that pre-empts plot turns.*

## **Structural Involution**

It is possible readers of *The Wanderer* will be baffled, irritated, or both by its structural involution. Three distinct strands are interwoven in the novel, three separate tales that frame each other like a series of parenthetical clauses, which, though aspects of the same larger story, never coalesce; the narrative is multilayered, its overarching trajectory sometimes slips away from the reader's grasp.

## Romance and the Other

The outermost element of the book, the frame story with which it begins and ends, is set on a far-flung future earth, at a time when, as the narrator describes it, ‘history is drawing to a close,’ (*The Wanderer*, p.4). It might, therefore, be assumed that this strand is science fiction.<sup>10</sup> Indeed the setting resonates with a science fictional conceit that had a period of great fertility in the early nineteenth century, and is still commonly employed. This narrative figure is that of the last living human. Adam Roberts, in his study of the science fiction genre, *The History of Science Fiction* (2005), traces the nascency of this trope to the early nineteenth century and discusses a number of works written between roughly 1800 and 1850 which employ it, amongst them George Gordon, Lord Byron’s poem ‘Darkness’ (1817) and Mary Shelley’s novel *The Last Man* (1826). Roberts suggests the reason this became such a pervasive image of Romantic fiction of the early nineteenth century was due to ‘increasing levels of knowledge about the Earth itself following extensive European exploration, the need in other words, to locate topoi for more radical alterity than the too well-known globe permitted,’ (2007, p.88). As will be seen, this logic arguably lies behind Peterkin’s use of the figure.

Despite this, however, it is not convincing to class the outer frame of Peterkin’s novel as science fiction. Roberts persuasively defines that genre as ‘disorderly technology fiction,’ (2007, p.18). Science fiction, for Roberts, at its most powerful ‘textually enfram[es] the world by positing the world’s alternatives’; it is a mode that enables potent speculation on the nature of things, a powerful antidote to the discourses of the ‘mystical, the quasi religious [...] discourse[s] that [insist] upon one and only one interpretation of the cosmos,’ (2007, pp.12, 19). *The Wanderer* is not science-fictional in that its evocations of alterity, while intermittently conjuring a science-fictional, positive pluralism, as will be seen, cannot shake the pervasive pessimism about the encounter with other evinced by the mode Peterkin most



frequently wrote in, horror. Furthermore, it is not a technological novum that projects the protagonist into the future, but a curse – the plausibility required for science fiction’s rehearsal of possibilities and concepts, its speculative play, is, at a stroke, effaced by the eldritch.

The generic features of *The Wanderer*’s outermost frame are in closest congruence with those of mode which, though it existed in a relation of mutual influence with science fiction, was utterly distinct from it, a mode that, for reasons which will be explored, only outlasted the nineteenth century in isolated works and as parody – the genre of the adventure romance.

Today, of course, the noun ‘romance’ most commonly signifies a sentimental or idealised love affair. This usage dates from the mid-seventeenth century, when the word was first employed to describe a literary genre centred on such passions. It was not until the twentieth century, however, that this asserted itself as virtually the sole meaning. Formerly, there was another sense, now almost completely subsumed. Romance originally denoted the demotic French language – differentiated it from Latin. The word therefore came to be used to distinguish popular verse tales, often on the theme of chivalry, which were composed in the vernacular, from more serious literature, which was written largely in Latin.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries this etymological resonance still had currency, and works of fiction that were tales of adventurous escapades were termed romances. The romance was seen in opposition to the novel: the latter concerned the real world and social life, and proceeded at a sedate pace, in a sophisticated, inspiring, and didactic manner; the former treated of the fabulous, in a hectic, pell-mell fashion, and was thought irresponsible, escapist, and vulgar (though, in retrospect, it can be seen that these texts often subjected the ethos of the epoch to an interrogation just as incisive as that of realist novels).

That, in writing the outermost frame of *The Wanderer*, Peterkin was engaging with this long-surpassed generic form, is clear from a number of features: the narrative tells of the adventurous exploits of a lone protagonist and has the loosely plotted, contingent, and

episodic character symptomatic of the romance; the main settings of the strand are a wrecked ship, the ruins of a former civilisation, and a peaceful idyll in the mountains inhabited by a wise and beneficent peoples – all locations reminiscent of nineteenth-century romances; the nameless narrator's interactions with some of the peoples of the far-flung future world are characterised by an attitude of superiority which would not be out of place in a supremacist story of colonial exploration; and there are allusions in the text to several classics of the romance-adventure genre, including Edgar Allan Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838), H.G. Wells's *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896), Jules Verne's *The Sphinx of the Ice-Fields* (1897, original French title, *Le Sphinx des glaces*), Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), and Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Lost World* (1912).

By inhabiting the generic conventions of the romance adventure, Peterkin was able to move his novel into a realm gravid with narrative possibilities. However, as he had previously in his writings created similarly fantastic tales by exploiting the potential of the horror idiom, it must be concluded that some other motivation lay behind the deployment of the adventure romance in the outermost frame of *The Wanderer*.

Horror generally creates its fantastic realm by means of a displacement. This occurs in the inset tales of *The Wanderer*, as will be seen. In his 'Treatise on Horror', Peterkin describes this procedure in the following terms:

Horror's most basic plots [...] revolve around a border between a 'real' (mimetic) and an imaginary realm – generally either a character from the 'real' crosses into the imaginary, or some fantastic entity irrupts into the everyday world. ('Treatise', pp.315-316)

Horror fictions are generally set in locations recognisable to their readers, and at times roughly contemporary with their composition, for horror's power arises from the disjunction

between the ‘real’ and the other it evokes; this is most disconcerting when its ‘real’ most closely approaches readers’ spheres of experience.

Most adventure romance texts also created their alterior spaces by means of a dislocation in space. However, in contrast to the literature of horror, this move was always into a place as yet unmapped, but that actually existed on the globe; there was a plausibility to its fantastic.

This was Poe’s technique in composing *Arthur Gordon Pym* – he exploited a contemporary lacuna in humankind’s knowledge of the terrestrial sphere, that of the Antarctic. Therefore, though the novel contains a number of phantasmagoric sequences, it was still possible for him to maintain the fiction was a true account, albeit an improbable one.

Verne’s *The Sphinx of the Ice-Fields* is a sequel to *Arthur Gordon Pym*. It was published fifty-nine years after Poe’s tale, and the way the two works differ says much about the transformation the adventure-romance mode had undergone in the intervening period. Verne’s novel constitutes a rationalisation of Poe’s, positing it as a mostly veracious account:

Edgar Poe’s work was that not of a writer of romance, but of an historian! Arthur Gordon Pym’s journal had actually been entrusted to him! Arthur Pym existed, or rather he had existed, he was a real being! (Verne, 1964, p.97)

All the wonders of Poe’s imagination admit of a natural interpretation in Verne’s tale – except for those that diverge too sharply from the contemporary scientific worldview, which are rejected.

The manner in which Verne recuperates the bizarre conclusion of Poe’s novel for the plausible illustrates this. The end of Poe’s tale finds Pym in a boat, approaching at a ‘hideous velocity,’ a range of vapour he likens to a ‘limitless cataract, rolling silently into the sea from some immense and far distant rampart in the heaven,’ (Poe, 1999, pp.246, 245). In the last pages of the book, it is revealed that, at the foot of this prodigious, spumy veil, there is a vast chasm into which the ocean courses – whence arises the rapid current bearing Pym’s canoe

onward, to doom.<sup>11</sup> In the very final lines of the novel – barring an explicatory postscript – on the brink of the cascade, the narrator is confronted by a ‘shrouded human figure [...] very far larger in its proportions than any dweller among men,’ who emerges from behind the pallid curtain (1999, p.246).

In *The Sphinx of the Ice-Fields*, these eldritch details of *Arthur Gordon Pym*’s ending are rationalized. The wondrous current that carries Pym’s boat along at incredible speed is revealed to have been to be due to the magnetic attraction exerted on its metal fixtures by an enormous lodestone located near the Pole. This vast magnet is shaped vaguely like a sphinx – hence the title – a form that explains the gargantuan human figure of Poe’s ending. The wonders Verne could not account for, that he could not transmute into the material of credible science fiction – the abyss into which the Polar sea pours and the vaporous cataract in the sky – his narrator dismisses as either fabulous embellishments wrought by Poe, or as figments of Pym’s over-active imagination:

Evidently Dirk Peters had never read Edgar Poe’s book, and very likely could not read. After handing over Pym’s journal he had not troubled himself about its publication, and probably he had no notion of the stir it had made, or of the fantastic and baseless climax to which our great poet had brought those strange adventures.

And, besides, might not Arthur Pym himself, with his tendency to the supernatural, have fancied that he saw these wonders, due solely to his imaginative brain? (Verne, 1964, p.142)

Verne’s rationalisations of Poe’s narrative can, in part, be ascribed to his tendency to make his fictions credible according to the scientific understanding of the day. However, it is also certain that advances in humankind’s knowledge of Antarctica influenced his treatment of Poe’s notions in his sequel. What for Poe was a virgin territory, a blank canvas for the creative mind, an unknown place that could be filled with prodigies and wonders, had, at least to a degree, been brought into the purview of reason by the time Verne wrote *The Sphinx of*

*the Ice-Fields*. Scientific and geographical understanding had advanced, and such conceptions as a gulf opening into the earth's interior, strange entities inhabiting the region, and a cataract falling from the sky, would, by then, have seemed absurd – pure fantasy.

*Heart of Darkness* demonstrates even more dramatic changes to the adventure romance. In this work the genre is in crisis. Like *The Sphinx of the Ice Fields*, *Heart of Darkness* is concerned with Western man's attempt to know and subjugate the world. But Conrad's view was not sanguine, as Verne's was. *Heart of Darkness* might best be described as a moribund romance – it is a book riven by the contradiction between a manifest delight, albeit a dark one, in adventures, and a profound anxiety about the imperialist exploits that often give rise to them.

As a consequence of colonial exploration, by 1890 – when Conrad captained a steamboat on the Congo River, the experience on which *Heart of Darkness* was based – the unmapped territories essential for romance had begun to disappear. The protagonist of the novel, Marlow, talking of the Congo, bemoans its transformation from a tantalising enigma to a murky space of conjecture, half truths, and lies:

True, by this time it was not a blank space any more. It had got filled since my boyhood with rivers and lakes and names. It had ceased to be a blank space of delightful mystery – a white patch for a boy to dream gloriously over. It had become a place of darkness. (Conrad, 1995a, p.53)

The glittering unknown places of the earth (the Antarctic of Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* is described as a space of overwhelming whiteness – a blank signifier) have been exposed to the 'light' of reason, though have not yet been developed, and *Heart of Darkness* is therefore a dark negative of the adventure tale, a novel profoundly anxious about the oppressive and sinister aspects of imperialism.<sup>12</sup> The work is also cynical about the supposed impassivity and incorruptibility of Western scientism and rationality; exposed 'to the lurking

death, to the hidden evil, to the profound darkness of [the Congo's] heart,' men – even a man like Kurtz, 'a prodigy [...] an emissary of pity, and science, and progress,' at least according to a fawning rival – wax barbarous and insane:

[H]is soul was mad. Being alone in the wilderness, it had looked within itself, and, by heavens! I tell you, it had gone mad. (Conrad, 1995a, pp.87, 76, 133)

By the time Arthur Conan Doyle wrote *The Lost World*, the romance had been made all but extinct – the uncharted regions of the globe its adventures required had shrunk to almost nothing. In one scene the protagonist, journalist Ned Malone, pesters his news editor, McArdle, for a dangerous and exciting assignment. In response the editor points out to the eager young reporter that the nineteenth-century project of carrying the torch of 'civilisation' into every corner of the globe had led to the end of the age of wonder: 'The big blank spaces in the map are all being filled in, and there's no room for romance anywhere,' (Conan Doyle, 2001, p.15). Conan Doyle's solution to this crux was to set his yarn in one of the last parts of the world still to be explored by Western man, the Amazon jungle. However, as even that place was, by that time, well enough known to be subject to the laws of plausibility, Conan Doyle needed to add an additional element of the fantastic. He did this by means of a remove, not in space, but in time, something justified by the narrative device of a plateau, raised at some distant age by a volcanic upheaval, which is 'cut off by perpendicular precipices [...] from all the rest of the continent,' and where 'the ordinary laws of Nature are suspended,' (2001, p.42). Conan Doyle located gaps, not just in Western man's geographical knowledge, but also in his understanding of evolutionary processes, and insinuated into them a fantastic environment. He thus created a space for adventure in a world in which such places were dwindling, indeed virtually vanished.

By the time Peterkin wrote *The Wanderer*, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, no spaces for adventure remained on the earth. During the course of the twentieth century, even

the wildest and most desolate places had been explored, tamed, subsumed by knowledge. New means of transport had elided distances, and the impact of new telecommunication technologies, vast corporations with global interests, and internationally popular forms of entertainment had pushed world ideologies and cultures towards uniformity. The differences that were a key thematic of the romance narrative had been all but erased.

Therefore, Peterkin's choice of a future setting for the outer frame of *The Wanderer* can be seen as an attempt to locate a new imaginative place for romance in an era in which the possibilities of travel, displacement had been exhausted.<sup>13</sup> He took *The Lost World's* device of a modern man placed in a distant epoch to an absurd extreme. He posited an internally consistent, if occult, means by which his protagonist could survive a postulated future end of civilisation, a descent of the world into darkness and ignorance once more. He was thus able to situate his contemporary narrator in an unknown space of excitement and danger, but an exotic, romantic space, not a fantastic one, like those of the horror stories he generally wrote (and indeed of the inset tales of this novel). This allows him to explore and utilise the generic resonances of the adventure romance.

Peterkin was therefore able to explore a key thematic of his corpus, indeed of horror literature in general, in a way that differed from his usual treatment of it. This thematic is the issue of the other.

The protagonist of *The Wanderer*, a product of a supposedly enlightened liberal age, at first evinces a prejudicial attitude toward the other, describing the natives of the Britain of the end of time as, 'degenerate [...] tribes,' and portraying their customs as barbarous, making no effort to empathise (*The Wanderer*, p.3). By the end of the novel, however, he has gained greater understanding. His salvation by the chieftain of a local tribe's act of selfless kindness has awakened him to the common humanity he shares with the clan. His witnessing of their treatment at the hands of Elliot, the novel's villain, has also changed him. Elliot's abhorrent and pitiless rule of terror – which recalls the tyranny of *Heart of Darkness's* Kurtz – is

encapsulated in a moment when he says to the novel's protagonist, to account for the heads he has on spikes above the entrance to his stockade: 'I've found these brutes are more tractable when the threat of bloody death hangs over them,' (*The Wanderer*, p.206)

These, and other experiences, cause the nameless narrator to realise his attitude towards the natives had been repellent, different only in degree, and not kind, from Elliot's:

It had occurred to me I had been as guilty as Elliot of hubris, of thinking myself fundamentally superior to the natives of this place. I may not have sought to subjugate, but I had made no effort to empathise, to understand, could easily have succumbed to cruelties to equal his; perhaps my attitude was part of what drove the tribe into Elliot's iron clutches. Filled with remorse, I resolved, from that time forth, to abandon my aloofness to the peoples of the end of time. (*The Wanderer*, pp.206-207)

One function, therefore, of the future setting and the evocation of the adventure romance is to explore the positive aspects of a meeting with otherness. The world of the early twenty-first century is one in which international commerce and the globalisation of culture have begun to erode useful difference, but in which otherness has not been effaced and remains as antagonism and violence. In his novel's outermost frame, Peterkin depicts contacts with the other that are positive, and differences that are resolved into identities. One example of such a meeting is the narrator's relationship with the tribeswoman, who is finally revealed to be Claire, another of the cursed from the gathering in the Nightingale. Productive engagements with the ideology of the other are also depicted in the novel. The narrator draws on the philosophy of the Himalayan peoples to formulate a plan he hopes shall enable him to achieve liberation from an intolerable cycle of existence and to frustrate Elliot's dark schemes. Furthermore, he relies on the esoteric knowledge of the other, the holy man, for its implementation. Overall, then, *The Wanderer's* outer frame posits exposure to otherness as positively transformative.



The novel is also troubled by alterity, though – its inset horror tales demonstrate that an encounter with the other can be disturbing, full of dread. *The Wanderer* is a novel which examines the many different facets of alterity and the complexity of reactions to it.

The strength of *The Wanderer*'s exploration of otherness lies in the fact the novel constantly interrogates its own positions. The sections of the frame narrative set in the Himalayas, for example, while containing, as has been discussed, moments that evidence the positive possibilities of a meeting with the other, simultaneously suggest, by recalling Shangri-La and a Western conception of Tibetan Buddhism, a pernicious aspect of the Western liberal engagement with the other – the idea that the 'authentic' lifestyle of the other represents a kind of utopian ideal, a notion that can be, in many ways, as repressive as earlier colonial ideologies, for it involves the projection of an imaginary spiritual fulfilment onto the other.<sup>14</sup> The fact the Himalayan idyll Claire and the narrator create for themselves at the end of the novel is one founded upon a grotesque, brutal act, hints at the violence done when the supposedly beatific way of life of an other is viewed as a mine of lost innocence and mysticism, at the way the other is subjugated when its ideology – which is a living, vibrant, complex, and riven thing – is made simple, static, and assimilable, turned into a theme park ideology.

Peterkin's deployment of the generic resonances of the adventure romance function, in part, then, to broaden the field of *The Wanderer*'s discussion of otherness – give the enquiry more nuance than the horror mode alone can afford.

### **Radical Transgression**

Another important consequence of the setting of the outer frame of *The Wanderer* arises from the way it functions within the involuted structure of the novel's plot. As it is set in the far-flung future and the central sections are roughly contemporary with the novel's composition,

the narrative constantly moves back and forth in time between the narrative's various strands - therefore the radical transgression of temporal borders is evoked. Most of Peterkin's other works follow the general horror template of locating an alterior, phantasmagoric space across an eldritch border from a credible contemporary world, and, hence, only depict the crossing of spatial boundaries.<sup>15</sup> The crossing of spatial frontiers is also limned in *The Wanderer*, in the inset tales, which are closer in tone and form to Peterkin's other works. The combination of these two kinds of transgression, spatial and temporal, achieves an aim described in Peterkin's 'Treatise'. The final section of this monograph discusses the attenuation of horror fictions under late capitalism. Peterkin argues that, since their power was to demonstrate the falsehood of systems of representation, they have lost their contestational force in the epoch of simulation. He asserts that, in the age of hyperreality, it is necessary for horror fictions to become excessive if they are to achieve their antagonistic power. They must, faced with these conditions, 'radically [transgress] the limits of culture's epistemological and ontological territories,' ('Treatise', p.346). That *The Wanderer* adds the crossing of temporal boundaries to horror literature's wonted crossing of spatial ones can be seen as a gesture towards this radical transgressiveness.

### **Playing Cassandra**

The far future setting of the outer frame also allows Peterkin to interrogate concepts that were founding principles of the institutions of knowledge of his own era. At one point in the novel, while musing on truth, the narrator describes the end of the epoch of reason, writing, in a phrase which echoes Foucault, that, in the early twenty-first century, 'the silent and apparently immobile soil of the Enlightenment era was suddenly riven with flaws, the ground once again stirred under mankind's feet,' (*The Wanderer*, p.152). Of course, as *The Wanderer*'s depiction of the contemporary world is an exaggerated portrayal, rather than a

naturalistic one, Peterkin was extrapolating from current trends, rather than actually predicting the looming ruin of the epistemological conditions that sprang up in the West during the Renaissance. The novel is certainly anxious about the erosion of the systems on which the modern age is founded, however. It is suggested that, in the era of postmodernity, chaos and otherness is being spawned in the interstices of the rational system of capitalism. In one early scene, the nameless narrator discusses this process, which he sees as a symptom of ‘simulation and abstraction,’ ‘[t]he proliferation of dissolute signs,’:

Increasingly representation does not refer to anything. Reality is being hollowed out from the inside. The fabric of the world has been rent, and through these tears creep things that come from some alterior, some other place. (*The Wanderer*, p.16)

A jotting Peterkin scrawled in a notebook kept during the period in which he was writing *The Wanderer*, is elucidatory, offers some direction as to how to read this thematic concern of the novel.<sup>16</sup>

The slow death of signification began with the ascendancy of the ideologies of the Enlightenment over those of the Middle Ages. The overturning of the rigid hierarchies of Medieval thought, and the transition to a world in flux, was progressive, but initiated a wasteful squandering of the resources of meaning it was not in the interest of the forces of hegemony to arrest until there were no reserves left. But by then it was too late, and now signification has become the proliferation of vapid signs in a void. (Peterkin Ms., no pagination)

In this note, Peterkin expresses ideas that resonate with those found in the works of a number of poststructuralist thinkers, most notably Jean Baudrillard. To expand this gnomic passage (and here conversations had with Peterkin in the months leading up to his disappearance are drawn on) Peterkin’s thesis is that an inflation within signification, initiated by the Enlightenment, has lead to a decrease in the value of signs, a situation which has reached a

dreadful pitch in the current epoch's frantic attempts to reconstitute sense. He felt that what he perceived as the empty, seething, desultory tumult of much of modern culture resulted from this desperate endeavour. The early twenty-first century strands of *The Wanderer* are a distorted representation of the contemporary world in which the crisis in representation is more advanced, its symptoms, the horrors depicted in the inset tales, more apparent. But this important thematic only really becomes clear in light of the protagonist's comments about the fall of the Age of Reason, referred to above, which are made, seemingly, only in passing. It is the future setting of the novel's outer frame that allows Peterkin to prognosticate, play Cassandra, exploit the monitory potential of fiction, make *The Wanderer* act as 'a watch that is running fast,' (a resonant phrase Deleuze and Guattari use to describe their category of minor literature in their work on Kafka, *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature* (1975)) (1986, p.59).

### **Mendacious Mimicry**

The narrational strategy suggested by *The Wanderer*'s outer frame is the common device of depicting a protagonist, who shall tell a subsequent inset tale or tales, from the perspective of another character. This form is usually deployed to explore the motivations of the protagonist and intimate that his or her account may not be entirely reliable. Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* are key examples of texts employing this strategy (and interestingly both works written at the beginning of the epoch that saw the virulent onset of hyperreality and which expose modernity's lurking wraiths). But, though superficially having the appearance of a novel with this form, *The Wanderer* only misleadingly and mendaciously mimics it – the frame and the inset tales are actually narrated by the same individual. Therefore, it is only by interrogating the protagonist's own assertions that readers can divorce themselves.

This functions to draw readers into the novel, impels them to take up more active roles, to challenge and probe the text at all times. This resonates with an idea expressed by Peterkin in his 'Treatise'. In discussing horror's hazing of textual frontiers, he asserts that powerful works in the mode 'force [the reader] to interrogate the categories of the real and the fictive and to question all that is presented to him or her as truth,' ('Treatise', p.330).

### **Another Distortion**

The second of the three nested strands that comprise *The Wanderer* also takes a form that constitutes a distortion of a common narrational strategy. The tales at the heart of the novel are framed by a scene in which the main characters take turns to recount events that have befallen them – a device familiar from numerous literary works and often used in tales of the supernatural. Here, however, the tales are all retold by the novel's protagonist; though the text shams a kind of communal polyphony and a shared, and thus more reliable truth, it is in fact a univocal production – no other voices intrude to interrogate the veraciousness of the account. This is another feature of the text that prompts readers to actively question what they read.

Despite this, the conventional structure of tale-telling does still partially have its familiar effect – that of making readers feel like intranarrative listeners. In *The Wanderer*, however, characters tell their stories not to divert, but to lighten the burden of horrifying events by expressing and sharing them – the gathering is a support group for those who have undergone eldritch experiences. Readers, therefore, feel less passive – it is as if they are charged with a duty to offer solace by listening attentively and sympathetically. Furthermore, being a listener in this context gives readers the uncanny sense they may be called on to tell a tale in their turn. Through these two effects, the novel draws its readers in; its horrors thus acquire added potency.

## Lim-inn-al Spaces

That the events of this second frame take place in a public house is significant. As the place in which the stories are told is public, and not private, the horror feels less circumscribed. But that would be true of any public location – park, municipal library, restaurant, etc. Peterkin's decision to set this strand of his novel in a public house has other, more subtle, ramifications. Drinking establishments are strange liminal places – borderline spaces where cultural strictures are suspended, and the boundaries of the possible are crossed.<sup>17</sup> However, the pub depicted here is of the old-fashioned kind which is segregated into a public bar and more comfortable saloon; the group gather in the saloon. As a consequence, though transgression and permissiveness are suggested by the setting, the sudden reassertion of strictures and hierarchies that comes towards the end of the novel, when Elliot reveals all the characters are ultimately subject to him, is foreshadowed by it, also.

The name of the place, the Nightingale, is suggestive, for, while it is a real London pub, the choice of this particular venue can be read as a reference to the myth of Tereus, Procne, and Philomela, especially when taken in conjunction with *The Wanderer's* allusions to T.S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land' (1922) which also evokes the ancient story, and the fact the narrator sees a hoopoe on his journey across Europe (the myth ends with the main characters being transmuted into birds by the Gods; Tereus is turned into a hoopoe).

There is a remarkable consonance of themes between the myth and *The Wanderer*. The story of Tereus, Procne, and Philomela, whose best-known recounting is Ovid's in the *Metamorphoses* (?AD 2-8), is a harrowing tale of barbarity and brutal vengeance. It tells of Procne and Philomela, who are sisters, daughters of Pandion, king of Athens. By giving the hand of Procne in marriage, Pandion forges a diplomatic alliance with Tereus, king of Thrace. Soon after the wedding Procne gives birth to a son, Itys. After five years in Thrace, homesick, she persuades her husband to travel to Athens and escort Philomela to Thrace for a visit.

Struck by her beauty, Tereus lusts after Philomela, and on arrival in Thrace takes her to an isolated cabin in the woods where he rapes her. Afterwards, to prevent her ever telling the world of his crime, he cuts out her tongue, which falls to the ground where it writhes like a snake. He keeps her confined to the hut, locked up for his pleasure. On his return to the palace, he tells Procne that her sister has died during the sea voyage from Athens to Thrace.

A year passes. During that time, Philomela weaves, on a primitive, makeshift loom, a piece of cloth with a message, telling of her disgrace and plight, emblazoned on it. This is taken, by a maid, to Procne. On reading the message she is overcome, distraught. Once recovered from the shock, she goes out to the cabin in the woods and frees her sister. They both then dress up in bacchanals' costumes, murder Procne's son, Itys, and tear his still warm body apart. After setting some of the pieces to roasting on spits over an open fire and others to cooking in a cauldron of simmering oil, Procne goes to summon her husband to a feast, while Philomela takes Itys' severed head and conceals herself in a gloomy alcove. When Tereus arrives, Procne serves him the tender chunks of their son's flesh. After Tereus has been feasting on the vile gobbets for a time, Philomela bursts from her hiding place, hurls the head at him. He realises immediately what has been done. Once recovered from the paroxysms of rage, grief, and revulsion he is cast into, he chases the sisters round the room, meaning to hack their bodies in sunder with his sword. Before he can do so, however, all three are transformed by the Gods into birds. Most versions hold that Tereus is changed into a hoopoe. Early Greek sources have it that Procne is turned into a nightingale, singing a dulcet threnody of remorse for the killing of her son, while Philomela becomes a swallow, which has no song. In some later variants, it is Philomela who is transmuted into a nightingale.

*The Wanderer* shares with this myth themes of violence, mutability, confinement, and torment. The allusion serves two functions: it emphasises that *The Wanderer* manuscript is seen by its writer/protagonist as an artefact conveying a message which seeks to expose an individual's diabolical actions, and, by doing so, end them; more importantly it imparts a

Bacchic resonance to Claire's and the narrator's dismemberment of Elliot at the end of the novel – something that will be discussed later in this introduction.

### **Voracious Horrors**

The frames of *The Wanderer*, then, constitute formal and generic departures for Peterkin. The tales embedded at the heart of *The Wanderer*, however, are examples of the mode he was best known for writing – horror fiction. Even in these stories, though, he was experimenting; they would seem, in a number of ways, deliberate deformations. In order to examine how, and to what purpose, it is necessary first to outline some of his theoretical understandings of horror.

Descriptions of the horror mode have often tended to the vague. While critics who have analysed fictions in many other popular genres have proposed that archetypal plots and themes govern the shape of individual works – in an effort, arguably, to define them as inferior to texts in the realist tradition, which are seen as being somehow more genuine and natural aesthetic expressions – few theorists have argued for recurrent structures and topoi in the case of horror. This is partly because horror is seen, by many, as too lowbrow to be worthy of serious attention, but is also a consequence of the fact narratives are adjudged horrific primarily because of their capacity to horrify. The assumption seems to be that horror arises spontaneously from horrible imagery and that no particular form is required for its generation.

This is maintained not just by the genre's critics, but also by its proponents; H.P. Lovecraft writes, in his monograph *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1927): 'we must judge a weird tale not [...] by the mere mechanics of the plot; but by the emotional level which it attains at its least mundane point,' (1945, p.16).

Peterkin, in his criticism, often argued against positions of this kind. In his essay 'Alchemy in the Crucible of the Tradition: or Literary Formulas and the New' (1989), he sets



out his thesis that all literary modes, including horror, (and indeed art forms in general), are defined by formulas. He felt innovation consisted of the deformation and manipulation of these formulas, and the production of new figures and procedures, or new combinations of figures and procedures, something that could be done most effectively by a writer with a thorough understanding of generic conventions.

It was not until fifteen years later, however, when he wrote his 'Treatise', that Peterkin attempted to delineate the specific properties of horror. In the 'Treatise' he adopts a position slightly at variance with his early ideas. One of the arguments of this monograph is that, though horror's operations, like those of all literary styles, are chiefly formal, horror literature, even at its most formulaic, is more difficult to schematize than other types, because it does not constitute a genre, but is:

[A] transgressive form, involving the transgression of expectations, of properties, of proprieties, of categories, of boundaries. [...] [horror] occur[s] in an instant, at a frontier, a border, a limit, and liv[es] in interstices. ('Treatise', pp.306-307)

It is, he asserts, a mode that results from specific narrative operations upon a work nominally situated in a more stable literary category. Horror is engendered through the disruption of an expected narrative trajectory by the irruption of a moment of horror. He thus, in some ways, adopts the position he had previously derided. The crucial difference, though, is that, for Peterkin, it is not the moment of horror itself that is salient, but the manner in which it breaks into the narrative. An implicit corollary of Peterkin's postulate in his 'Treatise' is that horror is the literary mode in which the radical is most easily generated, because its very form already involves a distortion of conventions.

According to Peterkin's account, the stable literary category in which the most effective dark tales are situated is realism – horror literature has 'a special relationship with mimesis,' ('Treatise', p.328). In its most disturbing form, it depicts either the incursion into a place in

some manner constructed as ‘real’ of a horrifying other, or the accidental straying of a character from a ‘real’ place, into a space of otherness.

A number of Peterkin’s novels and tales conform to this model. He often painstakingly constructed a mimetic fiction, only to tear it down with a vision of the eldritch. *The Changeling*, for example, is set in a London of the 1890s realised with minute attention to detail. The researches of the protagonist, Michael Wells, involve the depiction in the novel of numerous historical documents pastiched with a fidelity that further enhances the reader’s sense that he or she is reading a narrative which is not a fabrication, but a real account. When the supernatural finally appears, at the conclusion of the novel, with the discovery, beneath the peat of Hampstead Heath’s sphagnum bog, of the still-living body of a malefic fairy-child apparently born in 1578, readerly expectations are shattered in a manner that is uncanny and horrifying.

Another good example of this kind of work in Peterkin’s corpus is the short story, ‘The Dryad’, which is contained in *The Black Arts* (1999). This fiction only becomes a horror tale in its very last sentence, when blood drips from the stump of a lopped tree limb onto a child’s birthday cake. Any reader that then goes back and reads the narrative over in light of this detail, will discover that moments which had formerly seemed innocent and mundane have taken on terrifying significance.

By *The Wanderer*, however, Peterkin seems to have lost faith in this approach. In his ‘Treatise’ he states that: ‘Under [the] conditions [of late capitalism] the figure of the horrifying other has been deprived of its potential to disquiet, subvert,’ (‘Treatise’, p.345). Given this, as has already been discussed, he felt it was necessary that horror fiction be excessively vehement, radically transgressive.

In all the tales told at the gathering in the Nightingale, a realistic scenario is overturned by a moment of horror. However, in these stories, in contrast to most of Peterkin’s previous fictions, the irruption of the thing of horror occurs early in the narrative. Moreover, the sense

of mimesis is already, in several of the tales, undermined prior to this point. For example, though the setting of the beginning of the first inset narrative, ‘That’s the Way to Do It!’, is seemingly that of contemporary reality, no effort is made to convince the reader the events portrayed belong to the world they know. Most of the drinkers in the pub in which the tale opens are avidly watching a gameshow in which a young woman is being asked questions while ‘hanging upside down by her ankles from a contraption that looked like a device the monks of the Inquisition might have used to torture heretics,’ an image which is disorientating and strange, rather than one that creates an impression of veraciousness (*The Wanderer*, p.18).

However, though the ‘real’ of the stories is distorted, the technique of its representation does conform to that of mimesis. Roland Barthes, in his essay ‘The Reality Effect’ (1968, original French title, ‘L’effet de réel’), argues that a surfeit of circumstantial description acts as a mark of the real in fiction:

[W]hen [insignificant descriptive details] are reputed to *denote* the real directly, all that they do – without saying so – is *signify* it [...] the very absence of the signified, to the advantage of the referent alone, becomes the very signifier of realism. (p.148)

The depiction of the gameshow in ‘That’s the way to Do It!’ can be seen as performing two apparently antagonistic functions: in its narrative redundancy it signals mimesis; with its weirdness it suggests the recounted events are fantastic.

The ‘reals’ of *The Wanderer*’s inset tales are tainted from the outset by otherness, yet, because they retain the formal characteristics of the mimetic, can still be disrupted by the moment of horror. Hence, the characteristic transgressiveness of horror is intensified.

## Drifting Into Awful Realms

Another key generic resonance of the short tales of horror at the heart of *The Wanderer* is with psychogeographic fiction. Psychogeography is a term denoting the (generally ludic) study of the effect of an urban topography on individuals' psyches. It was embarked upon in the early 1950s by the French artistic and political movement the Lettrists International. The concept was further refined by the Situationist International in the late '50s and '60s, an organisation formed when the Lettrists merged with a number of other European avant-garde groups. It employs the *dérive* – a strategy which first appeared in the writings of Ivan Chtcheglov, but was honed by Guy Debord – as a means of meditating on a place. The *dérive* (the word literally means 'drift') is a procedure that enables an individual to interact with a given environment in a manner that privileges the various currents, interdictions, and enticements that act upon a walker there. Debord described it in his essay 'Theory of the *Dérive*' (1956, original French title, 'Theorie de la *dérive*') as follows:

In a *dérive* one or more persons during a certain period drop their usual motives for movement and action, their relations, their work and leisure activities, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there. (1981, p.50)

The techniques of psychogeography were originally deployed with a large degree of playfulness.<sup>18</sup> A later British tradition was to pursue these same procedures with more serious intent (or at least with less frivolity, if with the same ludic degree of absurdity). Though there were London-based Situationists and psychogeographers in the 1960s, including artist Ralph Rumney and Glaswegian writer and infamous junky Alexander Trocchi, it was not until the 1980s and '90s that this loose school of writers emerged; its best-known members include Peter Ackroyd, Iain Sinclair, and Will Self. In this British strand of psychogeographic

literature an abstruse historical, or occult resonance often initiates the wanderings of the protagonist or author; hence, an esoteric force present in the space deforms its rational prescribed topography.

Michel de Certeau, a twentieth century French cultural theorist whose ideas Peterkin was greatly interested in, in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1980, original French title, *L'Invention du Quotidien: Volume 1, Arts de Faire*) offers a theoretical analysis of the walking praxis of the urban dweller who drifts, which makes explicit that it can have a transgressive function:

[I]f it is true that a spatial order organizes an ensemble of possibilities (e.g., by a place in which one can move) and interdictions (e.g., by a wall that prevents one from going further), then the walker actualizes some of these possibilities. In that way, he makes them exist as well as emerge. But he also moves them about and he invents others, since the crossing, drifting away, or improvisation of walking privilege, transform or abandon spatial elements. (p.98)

To engage in *dérive* is to wilfully ignore the prohibitions and precepts of the powers whose rules govern the distribution of elements in space. De Certeau also posits a close relationship between this kind of wandering and the act of telling stories, '[w]hat this walking exile produces is precisely the body of legends that is currently lacking in one's own vicinity; it is a fiction,' (1984, p.107).

A subsidiary resonance of the title of *The Wanderer* (the prime is, of course, the allusion to *Melmoth*) is that it depicts acts of precisely the kind of drifting that are key to psychogeographic praxis, *dérives* initiated by the kinds of esoteric forces that are probed by the British tradition. In the inset horror tales of *The Wanderer*, the characters engage in drifting because they are drawn into spaces of horror; darkness is insinuated into rational spaces and distorts them. In 'That's the Way to Do It!', for example, the narrator stumbles across an underground cavern beneath Spitalfields, something that manifestly transgresses the known laws of that particular place. Thus, the transgressiveness de Certeau argues is inherent

in the act of wandering – the transgression of the laws of place – is yoked to the transgressiveness of the fantastic – the transgression of the laws of reality. The terrors of *The Wanderer*, are radically transgressive, do not just cross the boundaries that would delimit them, but deform and erase them. Real places that will be known to many readers are depicted as being rife with horror; drawn into the perturbing regions described by the novel, they may find it difficult to mark them off from the spaces through which they move every day.

### **A Web of Seeming Veraciousness and Manifest Fabrication**

*The Wanderer* is riven by a tension between the veracious and the fabulous. Of course, this is a general formal property of the kind of horror literature whose effect is derived from the incursion of a thing of horror into a setting described according to the principles of mimesis. In *The Wanderer*, however, this tension is made manifest, becomes a crucial strand of the thematic web. Throughout the novel the narrator constantly asserts the truth of his tale. Running counter to these affirmations are a number of indicators emphasising the work's fictionality.

These are of two main types. The first class relates to the narrative architecture of *The Wanderer* – the novel has a structured plot that a contingent, true story could never have. This can be seen most clearly in the way the frame tale builds to a climax and has the unsettling irresolution characteristic of horror fiction. It is also evidenced by the manner in which certain images recur and give the novel a figurative unity. On account of its deliberate artifice, the overarching trajectory of *The Wanderer*'s story gives the lie to the narrator's protestations of authenticity.

The second key type of element antagonistic to the narrator's claims to veraciousness is the novel's allusive play. No true account could accommodate so many references to other

literary works (examples are discussed in the footnotes to the text) and still remain faithful to events.

*The Wanderer*'s narratorial strategy also serves to interrogate and blur the boundaries between truth and the fictitious. The fact that, in the novel, in the second frame and the inset tales, an assortment of disparate individuals tell similar stories about dreadful and incredible things that have befallen them, works to suggest the characters are neither delusional, nor lying: each subsequent tale provides a kind of confirmation of the faithfulness of the preceding accounts; taken together they produce a sense of consensual truth. In this, the novel bears a strong resemblance to its key intertext, *Melmoth*. The narratorial involution of Maturin's novel is linked to its claim to portray true events. David Punter, in *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day - Volume 1: The Gothic Tradition* (1996), writes:

The form of *Melmoth* appears to be this: a narrative is begun which appears to be highly improbable. Before it ends, another narrative begins which offers 'separate' corroboration of the first. And before that ends ... [...] the audience is brought gradually nearer and nearer to a kind of circumscribed credence necessary for continued interest. (1996a, p.137)

On closer examination, however, the similarities between *Melmoth*'s and *The Wanderer*'s narratorial strategies can be seen to be merely apparent. *Melmoth*'s many linked and nested tales are told by a multitude of narrators; as David Punter writes: 'No single character in *Melmoth* claims to be in absolute possession of the truth; no single subtext claims authority independently of the others,' (1996a, p.137). Furthermore *Melmoth*'s tales are, in the main, first-hand oral accounts. *The Wanderer* dissimulates spontaneous oral narrative, manifold perspectives, and communal polyphony in its central Nightingale scenario, but is, in fiction, as well as in reality, a written document composed by a single individual, the univocal

production of a subjective vision, whose communication is textual, and therefore indirect and susceptible to corruption.

In 1820, *Melmoth* opposed ‘the authority of the living witness which is a powerful Reformation principle,’ to the ‘corruption of “authority”, derived from dead legalistic procedures – documents relying upon documents, hidden, inaccessible authority, handed down by blind repetition,’ (Sage, 2000, p.xxiv). In 2005, *The Wanderer* posits that the institutions of the Enlightenment, though they began with the promise of representing the will of the many, now, while still maintaining they fulfil this pledge, are little better than those they replaced – obfuscatory organisations that represent the interests of a privileged few. *Melmoth* brought vital testimony and dialogism to bear against petrified scripture and systems that spoke in the name of a small handful of people. *The Wanderer* suggests that, while the promises of the Enlightenment are seemingly still upheld, they have, in truth, been reneged upon.

This ideological message is an important part of *The Wanderer*’s cultural engagement. The primary function, though, of *The Wanderer*’s hazing of the distinction between truth and falsehood, of its drawing the reader into a web of seeming veraciousness and manifest fabrication, is to both raise the fear it might be a true narrative and not a fiction – suggest the possibility, however absurd, that the horrors described in the text might be real – and to simultaneously assuage this fear.<sup>19</sup> This discomfits the reader more than if the claims to truth were never contradicted, for he or she is forced constantly to ponder the nature of the tale, is never allowed to let the question of its veraciousness recede into the background of his or her reading. A fiction masquerading as a faithful account, is a convention, easily dismissed – a fiction that asserts it is a faithful account, but, at the same time, gives the lie to this assertion, is uncanny.



## Ritual and Representation

In his 'Treatise', Peterkin argues that the horror genre evolved from the Gothic romance, inherited many of its properties from it. He also claims that, though the Gothic mode began as a form that contested certain aspects of Enlightenment thought, was a tool of a project that sought to bring about the conditions under which capitalism could come into existence, once its usefulness was outlived, some of its works turned upon and attacked the very conditions (bourgeois capitalism) it had helped create. According to Peterkin, '[s]ome Gothic novels became dark others – ghosts haunting official culture,' ('Treatise', p.340). He sees this as the reason why the horror form is radically split between texts in which the horror is expelled – works that are affirmative – and works in which the 'real' is corrupted by horror – transgressive works.

*The Wanderer* inverts Gothic topoi in the manner of the 'dark others' Peterkin discusses in his 'Treatise'. Many novels of the original affirmative Gothic constructed the Medieval past as one of superstition and ritual – radically other to the rational Enlightenment (through, crucially, by reintroducing this sublime content, performed a role crucial to the establishment of modern capitalism, that of surreptitiously reconferring a talismanic aura on things, allowing worthless objects to exert an attraction). One key scene of *The Wanderer*, by contrast, posits an equivalence between the cruelties of a vapid contemporary culture, and the barbarities of the Middle Ages, between the rites of feudalism, and the rites of the modern era. In the narrator's tale, 'That's the Way to Do It!', as discussed above, there is a television showing a quiz programme in the corner of the pub in which the story opens. As already noted, this gameshow features a segment in which the host fires questions at contestants while they are hanging upside down from a 'contraption that [looks] like a device the monks of the Inquisition might have used to torture heretics,' (*The Wanderer*, p.18). This simile prepares the reader for an engagement with the Gothic mode, for the Inquisition is one of the bugbears

of the original eighteenth century works in the genre. Indeed it is closely followed by what could be a description of a superstitious rite from a Gothic novel, were it not for one key fact – the object of idolatrous devotion is the television set:

[A]n awed hush had descended upon the establishment. Glancing about me, I found that all gazes were fixed in rapt attention on the television set. Most of the patrons were motionless, their faces drawn and tense, though a couple of younger men at the bar mouthed what looked to be, ‘Take the money,’ over and over as if it were a petition in a litany. (*The Wanderer*, p.19)

This scene bears the influence of ideas expounded in de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life*. In a key section of that work de Certeau argues the secular media of the capitalist epoch exploit the funds of belief left over from the age in which religious faith was general, and have therefore come to occupy the position reserved in the Middle Ages for the sacred. For the French theorist this sleight causes an attenuation of the real by making it signify excessively:

[Bodies of dogma have always made themselves believed through two mechanisms] on the one hand, the claim to be *speaking in the name of a reality* which, assumed to be inaccessible, is the principle of both what is believed [...] and the act of believing [...] and on the other, the ability of a discourse authorized by a “reality” to distribute itself in the form of *elements that organize practices*, that is, of “articles of faith.” These two traditional resources are found again today in the system that combines the narrativity of the media – an establishment of the real – with the discourse of products to be consumed – a distribution of this reality in the form of “articles” that are to be believed and bought [...] The media transform the great silence of things into its opposite. Formerly constituting a secret, the real now talks constantly. (Certeau, 1988, p.185)

In an aside during William's tale, 'The Lamia', the narrator reflects on the dimension of power de Certeau would seem to be indicting in this passage:

[I]t now seems to me the exploitation of the natural desire to be granted access to recondite truths was what lay behind the power of civilisation's institutions. Belief was exacted as the price of the aped disclosure of profound, esoteric knowledge. (*The Wanderer*, p.75)

Therefore, *The Wanderer*'s evocation of the notion that the contemporary media has appropriated the dogmatic models of a superstitious past is closely allied with its concerns about the depredation of representation. *The Wanderer* dramatises a thesis that the media, through an inversion tactic designed to engender belief, the transforming of 'the great silence of things into its opposite,' is hollowing out reality from the inside, and that something ancient, archaic is seeping back – the real is resisting the superficial way it is treated, in the only way it knows – through the generation of transformative (sublime) horrors.

### **'Seeing is Believing'**

For de Certeau, the primary reversal effected by the media in the post-industrial age relates to vision. He believed that banal old adage, which had become the axiom and war-cry of empiricism, 'seeing is believing,' had been transformed from a method of establishing the borders of the credible, of the real, into an injunction:

[T]he modern age, which first arose out of a methodic effort of observation and accuracy that struggled against credulity and based itself on a contract between the seen and the real, now transforms this relation and offers to sight precisely what must be *believed*. Fiction defines the field, the status, and the objects of vision. (Certeau, 1988, pp.186-187)

A number of allusions and images in *The Wanderer* emphasise the tricks the eyes can play, the unreliability of observation as a means to understand the world: its reference to Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Sphinx' (1846), a story about a man of nervous disposition who is deluded by a quirk of perspective – a moth hanging from a thread a very short distance from his eye seems a behemoth scaling a distant hillside – which he takes for an omen of ill-fortune; the glowing cigarette ends William thinks are eyes; the trompe-l'oeil bridge on Hampstead Heath he ponders at one point; the scintillation of sunlight on the surface of the Thames that blinds Jane and her sons to the fact it is a 'filthy gruel,' (*The Wanderer*, p.119); and the curvature of the Woolwich Foot Tunnel in the same tale that, at a certain point along its length, makes it appear interminable (an illusion which, of course, the horror exploits by making it so).

At the end of the novel, Claire and the narrator use a 'rusty old saw' to dismember the villain, Elliot (*The Wanderer*, p.230). It could be argued two other meanings of the word 'saw' are being played upon in this sequence. Of course 'saw' is the past tense of the verb 'to see'. The word saw is also a noun meaning a proverb. The 'rusty old saw' belonged to Elliot, but is turned against him; furthermore, because '[i]ts handle [is] broken [...] [Claire and the narrator are] forced to turn it about,' (*The Wanderer*, p.231). Elliot, by dragging the other characters into dreadful realms, presents to them fantastic things that, due to their vividness, they cannot but believe. Therefore, he has characteristics of the institutions of the contemporary media. The rusty old saw, or hackneyed apophthegm that is used to cut him into pieces, is 'seeing is believing'. Therefore, this allegorical strand of *The Wanderer* would seem to be exhorting readers to break down the stories the media presents to them and critically examine the constituent parts, asking, all the while, a question that inverts (Claire and the narrator are forced to turn the saw about) the maxim the contemporary media has distorted. This question is: 'Is what is seen credible?'

## **A Nefarious Grandfather**

In the essay 'Aftergothic: consumption, machines, and black holes', Fred Botting propounds a theory that the persistence of the Gothic throughout the period associated with modernity – from its original manifestation in the anti-feudal romances of Walpole and Radcliffe in the latter half of the Eighteenth Century, to late-Victorian horrors like Dracula – can be explained by the fact that its cultural products 'simultaneously assuag[e] and [intensify] the anxieties with which they engage,' (Botting, 2002, p.280). According to Botting, the mode possesses the legitimate social function of celebrating 'the restoration of symbolic, normative boundaries,' in violent climaxes that depict the destruction of monstrous others, but at the same time heightens fears by forcing readers to experience an imaginative encounter with these others; the Gothic subdues horror, but, at the same time, perpetuates it.

According to Botting:

Gothic fiction articulates the symbolic dimensions of the shift from a feudal economy based on land ownership, patrilinear property rights, and aristocratic rule and privilege on the one hand to a bourgeois economy maintained through commercial contracts, mobile, monetary wealth, and the production and exchange of commodities on the other. (2002, p.285)

This transition is traced in the texts by a movement between the opposites of transgression and order, the former often represented by terrifying, and the latter by ideal, figures of paternal authority. Indeed, 'the usual subject of Gothic fiction can be defined as the transgression of the paternal metaphor,' (Botting, 2002, p.282).

Botting asserts that, in the era of postmodernism, the Gothic mode has been deprived of its former power. Authority figures have been rendered suspect and 'the space of a single credible, paternal figure is left vacant, to be filled with a host of fleeting specters of delegitimized (governmental, conspiratorial, military, corporate, criminal, or alien) power,'

(Botting, 2002, p.286). Countercultural trends have given transgression an appeal and legitimacy it did not hitherto possess:

Excluded figures once represented as malevolent, disturbed, or deviant monsters are rendered more humane while the systems that exclude them assume terrifying, persecutory, and inhuman shapes. (Botting, 2002, p.286)

Therefore, the contemporary Gothic figures that proliferate and circulate virulently and meaninglessly in horror videogames and techno-Gothic films ‘disclose only the formlessness, the consuming void, underlying the flickering thrills of contemporary western simulations,’ (Botting, 2002, p.298).

Botting links this transformation of the Gothic mode to a decline in the authority of representation and a rise of simulation:

The gap between human formations and the machines of production, exchange, and innovation widens and nothing seems to articulate the divide except the rapid generation of more and more simulations [...] No one monster [...] functions as an object of terror capable of giving form and focus to anxiety and thus to shore up symbolic boundaries. (Botting, 2002, p.292)

In Botting’s opinion, Gothic figures – whose purpose was to provide the sublime that forced the rational to reconstitute itself – therefore stagnate:

Since they seem unable to envisage a future that is not finally cloaked in darkness, the only projections to be made offer us a weary and ominously doom-laden view. (Botting, 2002, p.298)

Botting’s line of thinking, in this piece, is that all Gothic figures call for the restoration of symbolic boundaries, at least until the inception of the conditions of hyperreality deprive them

of that function.<sup>20</sup> Peterkin, by contrast, argues, in his ‘Treatise’, as explained above, that the Gothic, or horror mode (Peterkin saw the Gothic as merely one expression of the literary tradition he termed horror – the first) was, virtually since its inception, split into two oppositional strands, one affirmative (Peterkin’s description of this strand’s procedures and function mirrors Botting’s of the Gothic genre as a whole, and, in discussions, Peterkin did own this type was by far the most common), and the other transgressive.

The transformative power possessed by this second type could, according to Peterkin, at times be radical, though he states a caveat – they were ‘contestational, not progressive fictions; they gestured[d] towards an unknown, a terrifying void, but offer[ed] no alternatives, no solutions to spiralling disintegration,’ (‘Treatise’, p.342). It is clear, though, he felt the challenge these transgressive horrors mounted to orthodoxy, while not in itself positive, could force readers to interrogate the certainties of their episteme in useful ways; he claims these fictions ‘hinted at the secret vices of the institutions of value, at their insatiability and delirium, the hunger for profit and surplus they are unable to restrain,’ (‘Treatise’, p.343).

For Peterkin, as for Botting, a decline of the primacy of representation has drained horror figures of their vigour:

Under these conditions the figure of the horrifying other has been deprived of its potential to disquiet, subvert, because it previously did so by challenging orthodox systems of representation, something which is now pointless [...] The horrifying other can therefore no longer either provoke a conservative reaction to its assault on the real, or contest the real, for the real itself is dead and decaying. (‘Treatise’, p.345)

However, because Peterkin felt the transgressive threat of the horrifying other did not solely call for the restoration of symbolic normative boundaries, but, in some texts interrogated, or undermined them, he believed there was still a role for horror figures to play in provoking a crisis that might end what he perceived as the vapid state of postmodernism. He believed the decay of the sign to have resulted from a pernicious tactic whereby capitalist democracy

(which he seemed to view almost as an autonomous entity) sought (and succeeded) to prolong its tenure as the dominant politico-economic system in the West through the desperate simulation of commodities; postmodernism, for Peterkin, was born when the hegemony, rather than seeking to conceal its sleight, owned up to it: 'By admitting culpability the regime deflects criticism, becomes inviolable,' ('Treatise', p.344). Gothic and horror images now pullulate aimlessly, because their purpose is to trace the boundaries of a culture's epistemological and ontological territories which, under postmodernism, have become blurred. The solution Peterkin proposes at the end of his treatise, as has been discussed, is radically transgressive horror – a literature that tears down epistemological and ontological borders, rather than merely crosses them, a literature that thus allows the other in, and makes the familiar strange. Hence readers may be 'shake[n] [...] from their moribund apathy by [being made to] feel anew a sense of peril,' ('Treatise', p.346).

These ideas are dramatised and explored in *The Wanderer*. Peterkin restores to horror literature the Gothic topos of a diabolical figure of paternal authority, but deliberately distorts this image, making the evil father of the era of modernity a nefarious grandfather in the postmodern context: 'a well-spoken courteous pensioner [...] with a heavily-creased good-humoured countenance, and a shock of white hair which stood up in disarray,' (*The Wanderer*, p.12). One reading, therefore, would be that Elliot represents that which the evil fathers of the Gothic symbolised – the barbarous feudal powers of the Middle Ages – only considered from the perspective of a postmodern culture, figuratively one generation on from Modernity. After all, he seeks respite from stultifying eternity in a cruel pastime – behaviour very similar to that of the bored amoral nobility of Gothic horrors.<sup>21</sup>

However, at one and the same time, Elliot could also be seen as a benign authority figure of the modern epoch, one of the good fathers of the original Gothic texts, grown cruel in his senescence. In a number of ways, it would seem he represents the reneging of Enlightenment promises. His lack of empathy with those he hunts down, tortures, and kills, and the fact that,



when he discusses his early failures to create sane immortals to hunt, he uses scientific language – ‘my first attempts to produce such specimens were unsuccessful’ – makes him seem like a manifestation of an excessive post-humane, cold rationality (*The Wanderer*, p.199). Also, as discussed above, it could be claimed he is an avatar of the contemporary media, an institution Peterkin felt largely responsible for the degradation of the sign.

Elliot is also clearly modelled on Melmoth, the eponymous wanderer, and villain, of Charles Robert Maturin’s novel. However, when the resemblances between the two antagonists are probed, they intriguingly resolve into dissimilarities.

Melmoth is wracked with despair, driven, almost against his will, to entice his victims to sin. He is also capable of human feeling and tormented by it, as witnessed in the scene where he sheds tears when faced with the pathos and beauty of the innocence of the child of nature, Immalee, whom he means to corrupt (Maturin, 2000, p.354). Elliot, though, is insouciant. He remains unmoved by human suffering, and destroys lives, not to drive people to nefarious deeds, but merely to ‘pass the time,’ (*The Wanderer*, p.199).

When Elliot laughs it is not the laughter that Baudelaire formulates, in his essay ‘The Essence of Laughter and More Especially of the Comic in Plastic Arts’ (1855, original French title, ‘De l’essence du rire et generalement du comique dans les arts plastiques’), with reference to Melmoth:

Laughter [that] is satanic, and, therefore, profoundly human [...] at once a sign of infinite grandeur and of infinite wretchedness: of infinite wretchedness by comparison with the absolute Being who exists as an idea in Man’s mind; of an infinite grandeur by comparison with the animals. (1956, p.117)

Elliot’s laugh is ‘a high gloating gurgle,’ not a laugh of pride in superiority, and fear of insignificance, but one of sheer pleasure taken in hideous acts (*The Wanderer*, p.226). There is no longer a God in respect of whom to feel wretched, and aspiration to greatness is a

‘weakness’ Elliot has discarded along with pity and fellowship with man. When he is faced with defeat his laugh becomes ‘a bray of scornful mirth,’ a laugh from which fear and human frailty are almost entirely absent, and he submits to the grotesque torment of Claire’s and the narrator’s butchery of him ‘chuckling [...] and [...] ma[king] faces,’ (*The Wanderer*, pp.230, 231). This is utterly different to the manner in which Melmoth faces the hour of his perdition, ‘of his dark and doubtful voyage,’ (Maturin, 2000, p.601). Maturin’s diabolical protagonist wishes, as his end looms, he ‘had never been born,’ (2000, p.605). Perhaps this is because, as he avows, his ‘existence is still human,’ (Maturin, 2000, p.602). Elliot’s is not. In fact the ‘trace of human frailty,’ the nameless protagonist of *The Wanderer* glimpses in his eyes, and which fleets away so quickly, serves merely to show how completely he has abandoned, or surpassed his humanity – it only returns at moments of extreme anguish, and then only very briefly (*The Wanderer*, p.228).

Also, while Melmoth apparently remains tied to the person he was before he made his Faustian pact, Elliot has no consciousness of his origins:

I’ve really no idea [who I am]. Forgot long ago. It’s hardly important. (*The Wanderer*, p.196)

Another point of contrast, is that Melmoth, unlike Elliot, does not actually engender his victims’ misery – he merely seeks to exploit, in order to pass on his curse, the states of extreme despair into which corrupt systems of belief, prejudice, and the inequitable division of wealth have driven his would-be victims. But *Melmoth* is a novel riddled with ambiguities, for, though this would suggest an anxiety about religions and hierarchies of power, the novel’s most potent diatribe against such things is put into the mouth of Melmoth himself, and is seemingly, for all the passion and eloquence of its delivery, spoken in a cynical attempt to foster misanthropy in the breast of the innocent, Immalee. Furthermore, Melmoth’s speech is interrupted by a footnote in which Maturin states that the views put forward by his villain are

‘diametrically opposed’ to his own (Maturin, 2000, p.338). As Victor Sage notes ‘it is hard to know what the “diametrical” opposite of this passionate republican attack on “bloated mediocrity” would be,’ something that has the effect of unsettling the reader, leaving them unsure which position is being espoused, making the ethical terrain of the novel impossible to map (Sage, 2000, p.xxvi). Arguably, *Melmoth*’s conflicted stance arises from a tension between a belief that the innate virtue of man was manifested by the new ideals of Enlightenment rationality, and a concern that the institutions of this bright new episteme would themselves, in time, grow ossified and corrupt.

The differences between Melmoth and Elliot can be accounted for by the fact that, while *Melmoth* is a work of fraught optimism, *The Wanderer* is one largely of despair; what Maturin had feared had, by the time Peterkin was writing his novel, come to pass – the ideologies of the Enlightenment had fallen into stagnation and depravity. The aimless atrocities Elliot commits, his post-humanity, frantic hankering after sensation, and lack of an originary mythos make him an apt devil for the era of postmodernity; he is Melmoth grown old and altered by the conditions of hyperreality.

There is a note of hope in *The Wanderer*, however – Elliot’s dismemberment at the hands of Claire and the narrator would seem to dramatise the defeat of the decadent Enlightenment ideologies he represents. This superficially happy ending is troubled, though – Peterkin clearly did not see there being any simple solutions to the crisis: Elliot cannot be entirely destroyed – there is always the threat that he shall be able to reconstitute his sundered parts; Claire and the protagonist’s Himalayan idyll is founded upon a terrible act of violence that haunts them; and, furthermore, the future is barren, ‘no children can come of [Claire’s and the narrator’s] couplings,’ and, thus, no positive paternal model can efface the diabolical grandpaternity of Elliot (*The Wanderer*, p.236).

But the novel does symbolically illustrate the monitory power of literature, the way it can act as ‘a watch that is running fast’. Because Claire feels she – or a version of herself, for she

thinks she has somehow been split into two – read the narrator’s manuscript long before he wrote it, he speculates that it may have survived from one cycle of the earth’s existence to the next, indeed, at the end, attempts to ensure it shall do so by means of an enchantment wrought by a Himalayan holy man. Claire believes her other, or fetch, pre-warned about the dread things that were to befall her, avoided them. The model offered here is one in which literature, art, can alert readers to impending epistemological catastrophes, and, in doing so, perhaps avert them.

This posited survival of the manuscript would constitute the radical transgression of epistemological and ontological limits that Peterkin describes, in his ‘Treatise’, as the new progressive route horror literature must pursue. He, therefore, makes an implicit claim in *The Wanderer* that radical contestational horrors possess monitory power, can warn readers of looming crises. However, because the narrator’s cosmological reasoning is flawed – something which will be explored further in the next section – *The Wanderer*’s conclusion cannot be viewed as entirely positive: a pessimism creeps in.

## **Eternal Return**

Theories of eternal return are an important thematic of *The Wanderer*. Throughout the novel variants of the doctrine are described and probed. At the beginning, the narrator discusses the tenet of cyclical history held by the Himalayan peoples among whom he has lived much of his long life. At this stage, though he accepts the possibility of the rebirth of the universe, he rejects the concept of recurrence, ‘if the cycle of time is to begin again it will surely take an entirely different path,’ (*The Wanderer*, p.5).

Later in the novel, however, he writes:

Perhaps certain thinkers of the ancient world, who believed that the universe was periodically destroyed by a purging fire, and reborn from ashes to experience the same history, were close to the truth. (*The Wanderer*, p.119)

The thesis alluded to here is that postulated by the Stoics. In his *History of Western Philosophy* (1946), Bertrand Russell summarises the cosmology of the ancient philosophers of this tradition as follows:

Originally there was only fire; then the other elements – air, water, earth, in that order – gradually emerged. But sooner or later there will be a cosmic conflagration, and all will again become fire. This, according to most Stoics, is not a final consummation, like the end of the world in Christian doctrine, but only the conclusion of a cycle; the whole process will be repeated endlessly. Everything that happens has happened before, and will happen again, not once, but countless times. (2004, p.245)

For the Stoics, the implications of cyclical history were that the universe was an orderly system, with which it was the virtuous man's duty to live in consonance:

God is not separate from the world; He is the soul of the world, and each of us contains a part of the Divine Fire. All things are parts of one single system, which is called Nature; the individual life is good when it is in harmony with Nature. (Russell, 2004, p.245)

For the protagonist of *The Wanderer*, however, the idea of eternal recurrence is a cause for despair:

[F]or those whose span is finite the view which holds that history is a recurring cycle offers comfort, a sense of continuity beyond the borders of birth and death, but for an immortal it is intolerable, a vertiginous swarm of events without meaning. (*The Wanderer*, p.120)

This position is similar to that advanced by Friedrich Nietzsche in his metaphysics. Nietzsche did not assert the reality of eternal recurrence, but deployed the thought of it as a powerful conceptual tool. For him the idea was horrifying and paralysing. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1892, original German title, *Also sprach Zarathustra*) the eponymous protagonist describes it as an ‘abysmal thought!’ (it is of course literally abysmal, a plummet into the infinite) (Nietzsche, 1969, p.178). But to accept, even to wish for, the eternal return of all events marks, for Nietzsche, the ultimate affirmation of life. In *The Gay Science* (1882, original German title, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*) he writes, under the heading ‘*The greatest weight*’:

What if, some day or night, a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: “This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence – even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!’

Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: “You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine.” If this thought gained possession of you, it would change you as you are or perhaps crush you. The question in each and every thing, “Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?” would lie upon your actions as the greatest weight. Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life *to crave nothing more fervently* than this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal? (1974, pp.273-274)

Such an affirmation is beyond the narrator of *The Wanderer*. As the novel progresses, though he tends more and more to an acceptance of eternal recurrence as the ultimate condition of

things, the thought of it remains a burden he finds intolerable. He seeks a means to break the cycle.

By the conclusion of the narrative he believes he has discovered such a way. In the epilogue, he describes the understanding of history he has, after much consideration, formulated:

I think the earth, on being reborn, may sometimes undergo a history minutely at variance with that of the one which preceded it, and speculate the agents of any permutations that might occur are objects which survive the cataclysm and, persisting into the next cycle of existence, set up eddies in the stream of time. (*The Wanderer*, p.246)

The cosmology proposed here bears some similarities to the many-worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics. However, the narrator's musings are primarily philosophical, not scientific, in nature. Perhaps the best point of comparison would be the idea common in speculative fictions, of multiverses or allohistories (alternative timelines); his concerns, like those of such tales, are mainly ontological and ethical. It is his hope it is possible to positively alter the events of future cycles of history through profound efforts of will: 'Though the cosmos is perhaps resistant to such changes, especially those that give rise to paradoxes, I would conjecture the potential for transformation remains,' (*The Wanderer*, p.246).

As discussed in the foregoing section, the narrator feels he may be able to influence the events of the cycle of existence that will follow his by attempting to preserve his memoir, which exposes and denounces Elliot as a source of evil, through the catastrophic death and rebirth of the universe. He hopes to rise above the dread meaninglessness inherent, for him, in the idea of eternal recurrence, by means of a moral act, which – though not altruistic, for his future self may, presumably, benefit by it – could improve the lot of many. This conception is, in many respects, antithetical to Nietzsche's notion that to desire the eternal return of all things marks the ultimate affirmation of life.<sup>22</sup> For the narrator of *The Wanderer*, to strive for

change is the only way to escape the vertigo of a cosmos in which all things that happen have happened before and will happen again.

As explained above, the narrator formulates his thesis in response to ‘Claire’s uncanny feeling she was sundered in two – perhaps on reading [his] manuscript – had a fetch who experienced an existence that diverged from hers,’ (*The Wanderer*, p.246). He believes that an encounter with his narrative has somehow brought about the bifurcation of Claire into two individuals, one of whom, having read his tale and heeded its warning, is spared the eternity of misery and harassment suffered by the Claire he knows.

But this notion is riven by a paradox, which Claire describes – if a perusal of his manuscript were to free her from the torment fated her, she would not then attend the gathering in the Nightingale to tell her tale. The implication of this is that in a subsequent cycle of history her story would not be contained in *The Wanderer* manuscript, that there would be nothing to warn her, and she would certainly fall prey to Elliot’s machinations (it is this paradox she believes responsible for splitting her in two). If it is admitted this scenario is generally applicable, it can be claimed the narrator fails to realise that, according to his cosmology, history will not be changed permanently by the transformations brought about by the transgressive survival of his account, but will merely alternate between two variants.<sup>23</sup> The narrator will remain trapped in the vortex of the perpetually returning cosmos. This is indicated narratively by the way in which the novel circles back on itself at the end, with the narrator and Claire returning to London, the place where everything began. It is also intimated by the fact one of the torture devices owned by Elliot is identified, by an embroidered scrap of cloth, as an ‘Ouroboros Apparatus’. Ouroboros is one name for the archetype, descended from antiquity, of a serpent eating its own tail, an image often employed to represent ideas of cyclicity (which are, of course, a torment for the narrator). The text itself insinuates the narrator’s plan will fail eternally, and the superficially happy ending is undermined.



## Order/Chaos

In this introduction, it has been stated that, in a number of ways, *The Wanderer* constituted a departure for Peterkin. It does, naturally, however, bear many similarities to the rest of his corpus. It certainly recalls Fiona G. Ment's astute judgement, in her article about Peterkin's loose trilogy of the 1990s, 'Curdled Blood, Chilled Bone: Convention and Innovation in Peterkin's *The Shambles*, *The Necropolis*, and *Apocrypha*' (1998), that 'Peterkin often uses conventional tropes and formulas in such a way as to attack convention, defy readerly expectation, and decry complaisant fictions that offer the consolations of a predictable plot arc and narrative closure,' (p.73). *The Wanderer* deploys the generic topoi of horror in order to distort then and, implicitly, because these topoi relate to cultural doxa, to interrogate broader epistemological assumptions.

A key thematic of horror literature is the exploration of the opposition order/chaos. Horror narratives dramatise the destabilisation of a harmonious 'real' by anomalous, distressing, and repugnant entities. The climaxes of many tales see symbolic, normative orders and boundaries restored by the expulsion, or destruction of the grotesque other. In his monograph, *Danse Macabre* (1981), Stephen King describes this plot in the following terms:

[T]he horror tale generally details the outbreak of some Dionysian madness in an Apollonian existence [...] the horror will continue until the Dionysian forces have been repelled and the Apollonian norm restored again. (p.368)

There is, of course, another possible conclusion to this story arc – the triumph of the thing of horror; the orders of the 'real' in chaos. Theorists, therefore, tend to represent the mode, schematically, as being either predominantly affirmative or transgressive, depending on their ideological stance, and the kinds of works privileged in their discussion. Clive Bloom, in his

introduction to his reader *Gothic Horror* (1998), 'Death's Own Backyard', offers the following account of this critical orthodoxy:

Theories of gothic and horror literature tend to be of two philosophical types. The first sees such fiction as disturbing but conservative, restoring things to the status quo and dedicated to the ultimate return to normalcy. The second sees such fiction in the opposite light as disturbing in order to change, not recuperative and conservative but radical and subversive, dedicated to excess and marginality. (1998, p.13)

Bloom evidences a scepticism about such theories; it is his assertion that:

Whilst gothic and horror writing may exemplify certain positions, different books will do so for different reasons at different times. There is no more particular proof that gothic and/or horror are oppositional styles disturbing normalcy, the rational or the flow of 'bourgeois' history than that they support the above. (1998, p.14)

Peterkin would have concurred with this to an extent – he believed that, taken as a whole, horror fiction has no particular ideological affinity. However, he asserted the mode is 'radically split,' that '[h]orrors [...] occup[y] one or other of two antithetical positions – either supporting capitalism and the bourgeois ethos, or gesturing towards their ultimate collapse,' ('Treatise', p.343). This results because the tale of horror can only conclude in one of two ways, with symbolic orders either restored or in ruins – there are no other possible end states for such narratives.

He felt, though, as discussed above, that the onset of the postmodern condition had sapped horror, that its texts were devitalized. *The Wanderer* can be read as constituting an attempt to revivify the literature through a series of inversions. One of these inversions, arguably the primary, involves formulating a new, progressive distribution of the terms of the opposition order/chaos.

One strand of the novel that evidences this is the trope of depictions of the night sky. Human responses to celestial bodies have historically tended to occupy one of two opposing traditions. In the first, enduring patterns, a harmonious cosmos, are perceived in the distribution of the stars of the firmament. This consoles – life on earth may be distressing, contingent, but universal order prevails. H.G. Wells refers to this notion when he has the protagonist of his novel *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896), Edward Prendick, write that, following the terrible experience of which his account tells, he finds comfort in the study of astronomy:

There is, though I do not know how there is or why there is, a sense of infinite peace and protection in the glittering hosts of heaven. There it must be, I think, in the vast and eternal laws of matter, and not in the daily cares and sins and troubles of men, that whatever is more than animal within us must find its solace and its hope. (2005, p.131)<sup>24</sup>

Throughout history the idea cosmological order is reflected in, and influences, or even determines, events on earth has held great sway, and indeed still persists, even in secularized societies, as petty superstition, in the daily horoscopes found in newspapers, and magazines. The cares and woes of the world are lightened; human beings are not responsible for their fates, their sufferings.<sup>25</sup> This is the basis of the enduring art of astrological prediction.

The second tradition sees in the heavens a disordered mutable immensity, an elemental chaos, in the face of which humankind is utterly powerless and insignificant. Mikhail Bakhtin describes this cosmic fear in his monograph *Rabelais and His World* (1965, original Russian title, *Tvorchestvo Fransua Rable i narodnaia kul'tura srednevekov'ia i renessansa*):

We must take into consideration the importance of cosmic terror, the fear of the immeasurable, the infinitely powerful. The starry sky [...] the cosmic upheavals, elemental catastrophes – these constitute the terror that pervades ancient

mythologies, philosophies, the systems of images, and language itself with its semantics. An obscure memory of cosmic perturbations in the distant past and the dim terror of future catastrophes form the very basis of human thought, speech and images. This cosmic terror is not mystic in the strict sense of the word; rather it is the fear of that which is materially huge and cannot be overcome by force. (1984, p.335)

In *The Wanderer* the associations constellating around this conventional opposition are overturned. In *The Wanderer*'s bleak world, it is no longer possible to find consolation in the order of the cosmos. In one scene Saul, a minor character in Simon's tale, 'The Lamia', recounts how, when he thought he was dying, he had looked up at stars, 'trying to take comfort in the patterns of the constellations,' (*The Wanderer*, p.75) He finds he cannot, however, that '[t]hey had offered none [...] merely seemed faint gleams lost in the brutal, cold, and limitless wastes of space,' (*The Wanderer*, p.75).

The novel goes even further, suggests that the idea the cosmos is ordered according to some principle can itself inspire dread, because that principle must be inhuman, other. When Jane, in the throes of despair, looks into the sky of the strange and terrible wasteland she finds herself in, in her tale, 'One Moment Knelt the Woe of Years', she sees patterns that are dark and violent:

Jane looked up at the stars. Usually she saw only chaos in the night sky, for she had never learnt to pick out the constellations, but the patterns in that strange welkin seemed to have been chased by an apt, if devilish hand, and strongly conveyed to her a scene of bloody strife – grotesque beasts rending one another with tooth and claw. (*The Wanderer*, p.127)

A complementary figurative strand of the novel depicts characters who, rather than being awed, or terrified by a conception of the universe as chaos, take solace from it. The following moment, from the narrator's inset tale, is a cogent example of this: 'I stared up at the firmament hoping to calm myself by tracing patterns in the strewn disarray of the stars,' (*The*

*Wanderer*, p.25). It seems the narrator is consoled by thinking of the distribution of the stars as contingent, perhaps because this would suggest the universe is random, and concomitant with this idea is the notion that man has a stake in his own destiny, can trace his own patterns in the 'strewn disarray'.<sup>26</sup> This reading is supported by the fact that, at the end of the novel, the narrator writes that one of Claire's and his pastimes is:

[C]ontemplating the welkin's tapestry, and telling each other stories of the things we see sketched there in the patterns of the stars, fleshing out the tales of our private sidereal mythology. (*The Wanderer*, p.250)

This activity would seem an attempt to assert free will in the face of cruel fate.

Another aspect of the novel that works to interrogate the opposition order/chaos is its allusion to the story of Tereus, Procne, and Philomela. In the myth, the sisters dress as bacchantes to dismember Procne's son Itys. Therefore, it would seem legitimate to read the sawing in sunder of Elliot's body as an allusion to sparagmos, the ancient ritual of sacrifice by rending apart in which the Maenads, the female followers of Dionysus, legendarily partook.<sup>27</sup> Claire and the narrator therefore become frenzied Dionysiac revellers at this moment when the forces of horror are overcome, something that confuses the idea that the other of *The Wanderer* is chaotic, as it would be in the conventional horror plot; the suggestion is that it is inflexible orders that are foul. It is, after all, lives of pleasant quotidian disarray that Elliot destroys, something he does by imposing a cruel order, that of the hunter and the prey, whose relationship is fixed, not mutable. When Claire and the narrator overturn this by tormenting Elliot it is a moment of (admittedly troubled) triumph.

## A World Without Shadow or Twilight?

There is one crucial question that has not yet been posed in this critical preface/afterword: what kind of effect is *The Wanderer* intended to generate?

It could be argued that its aim is to make readers feel their own alterity. The novel's subversion of the real of the capitalist episteme, its depiction of the transformative potential of the encounter with the strange, the manner in which its horrors encroach on readers, and its breaking down of categorial oppositions, truth/fiction, order/chaos, can all be seen as elements in a broader project – the erosion of the distinction between the self and the other.

This is not just figuratively explored but is also probed narratively. In depicting its characters crossing frontiers into eldritch realms the novel presents to its readers a crossing of boundaries by the subject. As Martin Horstkotte notes in his monograph, *The Postmodern Fantastic in Contemporary British Fiction* (2004), '[t]he breaking in of the self on the world of the other enables the reader to witness the self's transgression of the border between the worlds,' (p.85). Another of Horstkotte's claims – 'the self who views the other is the other's other' – is figured in the plot of *The Wanderer* in the way its characters become other in the eyes of the other – hunted down by Elliot like animals (2004, p.47). Furthermore, the various encounters with radical otherness depicted in the novel do not reinforce selfhood, but destroy it, sometimes in madness, always with the transgression of the self's borders which is implied by immortality.

The form of the novel also evokes the transgression of the subject. Its presentation as a true account, composed by the protagonist, suggests the transgression of the self's borders implied by the writing of the subject's own story, both as a continuation of the self beyond death, and as a placing outside the self (on the page) of the self. And, as a fabricated found manuscript, the text aims to involve its readers in its spiralling, pullulating sequence of transgressions of the subject, make them experience themselves as other in respect of the

otherness of a novel that crosses into the real world in which they read – a real world tainted by the fictionality of the sham ‘real’ text.

*The Wanderer* is a novel that charts a descent from the symbolic order of the real into its dark inversion, the realm of the imaginary. It does this through a depiction of the becoming other of the self; the self’s other is that which it expelled (abjected) to the imaginary realm in the process of its becoming a unitary, coherent subject. *The Wanderer*, a fictional novel written by Simon Peterkin – the same, the real – becomes other, while *The Wanderer*, a ‘true narrative’ written by the unnamed protagonist – the other, the imaginary – violently asserts its own veraciousness, attempts to escape its borders and cross to the side of the real, become same. The text oscillates rapidly between the two poles of the real, same and the imaginary, other in the readers mind. This behaviour mirrors the model Foucault advances in his essay on Bataille, ‘A Preface to Transgression’ (1963, original French title, ‘Préface à la transgression’):<sup>28</sup>

Transgression is an action which involves the limit, that narrow zone of a line where it displays the flash of its passage, but perhaps also its entire trajectory, even its origin; it is likely that transgression has its entire space in the line it crosses. The play of limits and transgression seems to be regulated by a simple obstinacy: transgression incessantly crosses and recrosses a line which closes up behind it in a wave of extremely short duration, and thus it is made to return once more right to the horizon of the uncrossable. (1977, p.34)

For Foucault, ‘[t]ransgression opens onto a scintillating and constantly affirmed world, a world without shadow or twilight, without that serpentine “no” that bites into fruits and lodges their contradictions at their core,’ (1977, p.37). What kind of world does *The Wanderer* open onto? Encounters with otherness in the novel are not always negative; profound, positive transformations are also undergone by the characters. The novel speculates that an epistemological crisis is looming, and has a desperate hope that literature, art, will have the

power to positively mould the world that will be born from the ashes following the collapse. But *The Wanderer* is suspended at this point because it cannot approach the new order; it ends up vacillating, vibrating between the symbolic and the imaginary. Hence transmutation is frustrated and cycles of recurrence are unbroken.

Or, more simply, *The Wanderer* can be seen as a novel that explores the possibilities and limitations of subversive horror literature in a postmodern world. The problem of contemporary contestational horror is that its figures can no longer engender a transgressive shock; they have been vitiated by the rise of simulation, can only proliferate vapidly, in a void. Scrutinising this issue, *The Wanderer* tries to find a way forward; it makes its images more radical, transgressive, voracious, in an effort to shatter epistemological and ontological boundaries, allow the other in, make the familiar strange, make readers feel anew a sense of peril. This attempt ends in silence and defeat, however. Coming up against the limitations of the mode, and Peterkin's limitations as a writer, *The Wanderer* cannot shiver culture's frame. Ultimately, it is a failure, but it gestures at what might have been, had Peterkin's career not been brought to an uncanny end.

### **3<sup>rd</sup> March 2007**

It is early evening. I'm sitting on the sofa in my living room, laptop balanced upon my knees, drinking a dusky malt whisky by the tumblerful, and typing this. My television is on, volume low, a cookery programme; a comforting drone in the background. I spent the afternoon at the desk in my study, but was too agitated, apprehensive to concentrate on my books. A fierce wind was blowing, and, instead of working, I listened to it whine in the chimney, and stared out the window at the elm at the end of the communal garden, which was taking frantic swipes at the air with its branches.



About an hour ago all fell still. Then the rain came, a few drops at first, splashing in the water butt outside. But it grew steadily heavier, was soon a downpour, and, drainpipe blocked with leaf mulch in which is rooted a sapling oak, the guttering under the eaves overflowed. A curtain of water cascaded down before my study window, beyond which the garden was blurry, smeared. A magnolia, in flower, was just visible at the far end; looking out into the night, a faint reflection of my face on the glass, was like catching sight of my double in some paradisiacal land beyond a cataract.

How blind I was! *The Wanderer* is not a novel, an innocent fiction. It must be a malicious hoax crafted to madden me or entice me to a place where I'll be punished for an inherited crime. Or it could be something far worse, a faithful account that shows the world I know to be merely a veil laid over corruption and rottenness to hide it from the general sight of humankind! I've been drawn into the heart of a mire by treacherous marsh fires and am lost. This evening I'll go to the Nightingale and learn the truth – I fear I may not see sunrise.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> cf. *The Necropolis* (1993), *Apocrypha* (1996), 'The Brass Ferrule' and 'The Glass Eye of the Stuffed and Mounted Bream that Hangs Over the Mantelpiece in the Old Stainer Place' in *The Seven Circles* (1988), and 'Loathstone' in *The Black Arts* (1999).

<sup>2</sup> In the autobiographical essay, 'Blood Feud', published in 1985 in the horror journal *Gore*, following widespread condemnation, especially in the tabloids, as an outrage to public morals, of his novel, *Ilona Joo* (1984) (the piece was subsequently collected in *Peregrinations in Eldritch Regions: The Collected Non-Fiction of Simon Peterkin, 1980-2000* (2000)), Peterkin wryly describes his probable illegitimacy as his 'first and sole transgression of social mores,' and one for which 'no blame could ever, even by the most virulent hack, be apportioned [him],' (2000b, p.37).

<sup>3</sup> Moorcock wished to bring about ‘a cross-fertilisation of popular sf, science and the work of the literary and artistic avant garde,’ (Moorcock, cited in Greenland, 1983, p.16).

<sup>4</sup> In an anonymous letter printed, under the heading, ‘The Faustian Pact of Those Who Write, but do not Speak Out’, in the issue of *Phantastic Realms* following that in which ‘The Murder of Peter Crow’ appeared, the tale is castigated for its lack of engagement with political issues: ‘All literature which fails to directly speak out against exploitation and oppression, however avant-garde, is escapism, a distraction from the issues of the day, and in tacit league with the Man,’ ([Anon.], 1967, p.34).

<sup>5</sup> Peterkin was to retain Straker’s representation and the two were to become close friends.

<sup>6</sup> *Melmoth* is, of course, an important influence on *The Wanderer*.

<sup>7</sup> It is now thought reports of these rituals were promulgated by Christian missionaries who wished to depict the Hindu followers of Krishnu as crazed fanatics, and based on eyewitness accounts of what were merely unfortunate accidents.

<sup>8</sup> Details of these titles can be found in the Chronology of Peterkin’s Life and Writings.

<sup>9</sup> As they are in the works of many other horror writers, including the hugely influential H.P. Lovecraft. He describes, in *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1927), how, for him, ‘the one test of the really weird is simply this – whether or not there be excited in the reader a profound sense of dread, and of contact with unknown spheres and powers; a subtle attitude of awed listening, as if for the beating of black wings or the scratching of outside shapes and entities on the known universe’s utmost rim,’ (1945, p.16).

<sup>10</sup> Especially given Peterkin’s fondness for, and minor involvement in the genre’s ‘New Wave’ movement in the 1960s.

<sup>11</sup> It is possible Poe intended to suggest, in his narrative, that an opening into a hollow interior of the earth could be found at the South Pole. He is known to have been intrigued by the conceptions of the explorer, journalist, and well-known hollow-earth proponent Jeremiah N.

Reynolds (a commonly related story about Edgar Allan Poe is that he repeatedly called out the name 'Reynolds' in a delirium on the night before he died, and it has been speculated that, if this was so, it could have been J.N. Reynolds whom he sought to invoke (Poe's enigmatic last hours are the subject of Peterkin's short fiction, 'Reynolds')).

<sup>12</sup> It is worth noting here that most novels of adventure were complicit in the colonial project, existed as aesthetic confirmation of the age's rush to explore (and exploit) 'virgin' lands. The genre, therefore, helped bring about its own demise.

<sup>13</sup> Of course, Peterkin could have had his protagonist travel into outer space in order to locate him in a space rife with adventurous potential, but this would have initiated a move into the science-fiction genre, which, as previously explained, Peterkin apparently wished to avoid.

<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, many of the Beats, whom Peterkin was fond of in his youth, but grew disillusioned with in later life, were proponents of a mystical version of Tibetan Buddhism.

<sup>15</sup> Peterkin's first novel *The Changeling* and his short story 'The Cromlech', foretold *The Wanderer's* crossing of temporal borders by limning the irruption of terrible past into the narrative. Their transgressiveness is much less radical, however, is constrained by a single, linear timeline.

<sup>16</sup> Throughout his writing life, Peterkin noted down sketches and ideas for novels, short stories, and essays, planned out narratives and arguments, and recorded quotations that had intrigued him, from fiction, criticism, newspapers, magazines etc., in a succession of notebooks (he never jotted down conversations overheard, as many writers do, however; he was completely uninterested in replicating the phraseologies and rhythms of authentic speech, thinking the attempt to do so part of a pernicious bourgeois realist literary tradition). When one book was filled, he would place it on a shelf in his study, so as to have it to hand, should he need it, and begin another. These notebooks contain a wealth of fascinating material. They

are all non-descript, feint-ruled, pocket-sized, and black; Peterkin's hand is printed, minute, and meticulous.

<sup>17</sup> Arguably this is particularly true of quaint, homely boozers, like the one that is the scene for this frame – modern bars do not foster the same kind of permissiveness.

<sup>18</sup> One of the great attractions of the Parisian terrain for Debord and his cronies were its cafés and bars; Debord's life was one of chronic alcoholism.

<sup>19</sup> Peterkin went to even greater lengths in the manuscript copy to give the impression it was real, doctoring the physical form of the document to provide seeming confirmation of the veraciousness of his imaginative creation.

<sup>20</sup> Elsewhere Botting propounds a different conception; see the article, 'Signs of Evil: Bataille, Baudrillard and Postmodern Gothic' (2004).

<sup>21</sup> With respect to this interpretation, it is arguably significant that Peterkin's second novel concerned the terrible murders apparently committed in Hungary around the turn of the seventeenth century by Countess Erzsébet Báthory.

<sup>22</sup> Indeed Nietzsche's conception of eternal return, as Walter Kaufmann discusses in his introduction to *The Gay Science*, 'precludes any variation, however small,' (1974, p.17).

<sup>23</sup> The only way in which the cosmos could be changed forever to the good, is if the original manuscript survives perpetually through all cycles of existence. However, it is suggested this cannot happen, because it is stated the holy man's warding magic will be broken once the sack in which the manuscript is to be placed is opened.

<sup>24</sup> This notion is, interestingly, undermined by the fact that two years after *The Island of Doctor Moreau* was published, Wells was to offer his reading public a dark vision of an evil hailing from the very sky whose observation had comforted Prendick – *The War of the Worlds* (1898).

<sup>25</sup> This relates to the cosmology of the Stoics discussed above.

<sup>26</sup> The protagonist is, at this moment, prevented from seeing the constellations by London's light pollution: 'the sky was silted by the city's effulgence, and only the very brightest of [the stars] were visible,' (*The Wanderer*, p.25). This suggests that, in *The Wanderer*, urban rationalities are inimical to autonomy, something which relates to the earlier discussion of psychogeography.

<sup>27</sup> This reading is, of course, supported by the frequent references to the drinking of alcohol that are strewn throughout the novel.

<sup>28</sup> The value of this comparison is suggested by the fact Peterkin refers to this essay in his 'Treatise'.

### Suggestions for Further Reading

Peterkin's appeal was, at best, cultish, so it is unsurprising there is a dearth of criticism on his interesting corpus. The following is, regrettably, a comprehensive list (excluding only the few obtuse, excoriating reviews that appeared in the mainstream press, which are not worth the barest glance): Pol Carew, 'Strange (Peter)Kin', in *Gore* 34, 2005, no.2, Summer, pp.63-80; Harold Gomez, introduction to *Peregrinations in Eldritch Regions: The Collected Non-Fiction of Simon Peterkin, 1980-2000*, 2000, London, Ormolu Press, pp.vii-xxii; James Halloran, 'The Vanishing: An Overview of the Works of Simon Peterkin', in *Gore* 34, 2005, no.2, Summer, pp.41-48; Stuart Ham, *The Narrative Art of Simon Peterkin*, London, Ormolu Press, 2001; and Fiona G. Ment, 'Curdled Blood, Chilled Bone: Convention and Innovation in Peterkin's *The Shambles*, *The Necropolis*, and *Apocrypha*', in *Troposphere: A Journal of Genre Studies* 35, *The Horror Volume*, 1998, no.1, Spring, pp.63-82.

The engagements of these writers tend toward the banal, only Fi Ment's and Harold Gomez's essays offering anything approaching genuine insight. Stuart Ham's monograph, the only longer piece to have been written on Peterkin, is particularly deplorable. It lacks rigour, is badly researched and poorly written, and contains misquotations and factual errors. In putting forward a pet theory, the writer misrepresents and distorts Peterkin's oeuvre. A clumsy (one is tempted to say Ham-fisted) work.

The following is a list of some of the most influential studies on the interrelated traditions of horror, the Gothic, and the fantastic in literature. This editor will refrain from passing comment on the relative merits of these works – they are all interesting in their own way, and many are excellent: Fred Botting and Dale Townshend (eds.), *Gothic: Volume I*, Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies, London, Routledge, 2004; Neil Cornwell, *The*

*Literary Fantastic: From Gothic to Postmodernism*, Hemel Hempstead, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990; Joseph Gixti, *Terrors of Uncertainty: The Cultural Contexts of Horror Fiction*, London, Routledge, 1989; Terry Heller, *The Delights of Terror: An Aesthetics of the Tale of Terror*, Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1987; Jerrold E. Hogle (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002; Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, London, Routledge, 1981; Stephen King, *Danse Macabre*, London, Macdonald, 1981; H.P. Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, New York, Ben Abramson, 1927; David Punter, *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day*, London, Longman, 1996; and Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre (Introduction à la littérature fantastique)*, trans. R. Howard, Ithaca, New York, Cornell University Press, 1980 (1970).

### A Chronology of Simon Peterkin's Life and Writings

Year	Historical Context	Cultural Context	Age	Life and Writings
1945	Hitler commits suicide; Germany Surrenders; US drops atomic bombs on Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; Japan surrenders; first computer built; microwave oven invented; United Nations founded.			Simon Peterkin born at Bedford (30/04), first child of Edward Peterkin, headmaster of a village infants school, and Dora Peterkin (née Canning), Wren, and later television scriptwriter.
1946	Nuremburg Trials; Churchill's 'Iron Curtain' speech; Bikini swimwear introduced.	Mervyn Peake, <i>Titus Groan</i> ; death of H. G. Wells.	1	
1947	Nationalisation of British coal mines; discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls; India and Pakistan gain independence from Britain; death of Henry Ford.	Albert Camus, <i>The Plague</i> ; Anne Frank, <i>Diary of a Young Girl</i> ; Walter Owen, 'More Things in Heaven... '.	2	



Year	Historical Context	Cultural Context	Age	Life and Writings
1948	Assassination of Gandhi; creation of State of Israel; Berlin Airlift; formulation of the 'Big Bang' Theory.	Yukio Mishima, <i>Confessions of a Mask</i> ; Ezra Pound, <i>The Pisan Cantos</i> .	3	Birth of sister, Teresa. Peterkin falls seriously ill. The onset of the condition is rapid. Symptoms include fever, bronchial congestion, and a red rash on the palms of the hands. At the same time, conceives a horror of mirrors and other reflective surfaces. The family doctor is perplexed when Peterkin does not respond to treatment with antibiotics. Then, after a period of six months, recovers as suddenly and mysteriously as he was afflicted. In later years will blame bouts of lethargy and night terrors on this childhood sickness.
1949	South Africa institutionalizes apartheid; Britain recognizes the independence of the Republic of Ireland; Peoples Republic of China announced by Mao Zedong; NATO established.	George Orwell, <i>Nineteen Eighty-Four</i> ; <i>The Third Man</i> , dir. Carol Reed.	4	January of this year sees heavy snowfalls. Taken sledging by his father, one of his earliest memories.
1950	North Korean forces invade South Korea; Chinese forces invade Tibet.	Samuel Beckett, <i>Molloy</i> ; Eugène Ionesco, <i>The Bald Soprano</i> ; C.S. Lewis, <i>The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe</i> ; death of Al Jolson; death of George Orwell.	5	Birth of brother, George. Heavy spring rains see the Great Ouse burst its banks; house flooded. Starts at the school where his father is headmaster.

Year	Historical Context	Cultural Context	Age	Life and Writings
1951		Samuel Beckett, <i>Malone Dies</i> .	6	Family holiday to Margate. Terrified by a seafront Punch and Judy show.
1952	Death of George VI; coronation of Elizabeth II; Britain announces development of atomic weapons.	Samuel Beckett, <i>The Unnamable</i> .	7	Progress at school slow, parents concerned.
1953	Death of Stalin; Korean armistice signed; Moscow announces explosion of hydrogen bomb; discovery of DNA; Hillary and Norgay climb Mount Everest.	Samuel Beckett, <i>Waiting for Godot</i> ; William Burroughs, <i>Junky</i> ; Alain Robbe-Grillet, <i>The Erasers</i> .	8	Reading suddenly improves. At beginning of the year struggles with even the simplest children's tales, by end is reading adult fiction without difficulty. Edgar Allan Poe and Arthur Conan Doyle are early favourites.
1954	Commencement of Algerian war of independence; end of rationing in UK.	J.R.R. Tolkien, <i>The Fellowship of the Ring</i> and <i>The Two Towers</i> .	9	Peterkin is out playing in fields near his home when some older boys of his acquaintance dare him to leap an irrigation ditch. Falling short, he lands on the badly decomposed carcass of a sheep. Later will describe the experience as a formative one.
1955	Churchill resigns; death of Albert Einstein.	Vladimir Nabokov, <i>Lolita</i> ; Flannery O' Connor, <i>A Good Man is Hard to Find</i> ; J.R.R. Tolkien, <i>The Return of the King</i> ; death of Thomas Mann.	10	

Year	Historical Context	Cultural Context	Age	Life and Writings
1956	Suez Crisis.	Guy Debord, <i>Theory of the Dérive</i> .	11	Achieves good scores in eleven-plus exam. Attends local grammar school.
1957	The USSR launches Sputnik I, marking the beginning of the space age and tests its first successful ICBM.	<i>The Seventh Seal</i> , dir. Ingmar Bergman.	12	
1958		Claude Lévi-Strauss, <i>Structural Anthropology</i> ; <i>Vertigo</i> , dir. Alfred Hitchcock.	13	
1959	Fidel Castro assumes power in Cuba; Dalai Lama flees Tibet for India.	William Burroughs, <i>Naked Lunch</i> ; Alain Robbe-Grillet, <i>In the Labyrinth</i> .	14	
1960	Eichmann is discovered in hiding in Argentina (in 1962 he will be executed in Israel).	<i>Psycho</i> , dir. Alfred Hitchcock; <i>Peeping Tom</i> , dir. Michael Powell.	15	A friend, a cinema usher, conspires to admit the underage Peterkin to a showing of the X-rated <i>Psycho</i> . Finds the film terrifying, but enjoyable.
1961	Bay of Pigs incident; Berlin Wall goes up.	Joseph Heller, <i>Catch-22</i> ; death of Carl Jung.	16	Reading voraciously, both canonical (Melville, Cervantes, Charlotte Brönte, Austen, Dickens,) and more sensational (Machen, Le Fanu, Lovecraft) writers. First expresses desire (to his mother) to be a writer.

Year	Historical Context	Cultural Context	Age	Life and Writings
1962	Cuban Missile Crisis.	J.G. Ballard, <i>The Drowned World</i> ; Jorge Luis Borges, <i>Labyrinths</i> ; Ken Kesey, <i>One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest</i> ; Vladimir Nabokov, <i>Pale Fire</i> ; death of William Faulkner.	17	
1963	Profumo affair; Assassination of J. F. Kennedy.	Thomas Pynchon, <i>V</i> ; Kurt Vonnegut, <i>Cats Cradle</i> .	18	Achieves good A-Level results. Decides to work for two years before going away to University. Father offers him a post as a teaching assistant at his school.
1964		Kobo Abe, <i>The Face of Another</i> ; <i>Dr. Strangelove</i> , dir. Stanley Kubrick.	19	Reads Kafka and Beckett.
1965	First US combat troops sent to Vietnam. Death of Winston Churchill.	Death of T.S. Eliot.	20	Attends Warwick University. Begins to write short fiction. Reads the Beats, in particular William Burroughs.

Year	Historical Context	Cultural Context	Age	Life and Writings
1966	Death of Walt Disney.	John Barth, <i>Giles Goat-Boy</i> ; Robert Coover, <i>The Origin of the Brunists</i> ; Michel Foucault, <i>The Order of Things</i> ; Thomas Pynchon, <i>The Crying of Lot 49</i> ; first episode of <i>Star Trek</i> broadcast.	21	
1967		Gabriel García Márquez, <i>One Hundred Years of Solitude</i> .	22	Has his first short story published. Entitled, 'The Murderer of Peter Crow', it appears in small-circulation, experimental fiction magazine, <i>Phantastic Realms</i> .
1968	My Lai massacre; invasion of Czechoslovakia by USSR.	<i>2001: A Space Odyssey</i> , dir. Stanley Kubrick; <i>Night of the Living Dead</i> , dir. George A. Romero; death of Marcel Duchamp.	23	Is awarded Bachelor of Arts. Moves to London.

Year	Historical Context	Cultural Context	Age	Life and Writings
1969	Apollo 11 moon landing; Manson family murders.	Robert Coover, <i>Pricksongs and Descants</i> ; Kurt Vonnegut, <i>Slaughterhouse-Five</i> ; Woodstock; fan killed at Rolling Stones concert (Altamont) by members of Hell's Angels.	24	Discouraged, abandons literary ambitions. Begins training as a social worker.
1970		Tzvetan Todorov, <i>The Fantastic</i> .	25	
1971			26	Qualifies as a social worker, chooses to specialise in mental health.  Reads Angela Carter's <i>Love</i> , is to remain a committed admirer of her work.
1972	Bloody Sunday massacre in Derry; pocket calculators introduced	Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, <i>Anti-Oedipus</i> ; <i>The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie</i> , dir. Luis Buñuel; Atari introduces the arcade version of <i>Pong</i> , the first video game.	27	Meets future wife, Anne Metcalf.

Year	Historical Context	Cultural Context	Age	Life and Writings
1973	US pulls out of Vietnam.	Roland Barthes, <i>The Pleasure of the Text</i> ; Thomas Pynchon, <i>Gravity's Rainbow</i> ; <i>The Exorcist</i> , dir. William Friedkin; death of Pablo Picasso.	28	Proposes to Anne.
1974		Stephen King, <i>Carrie</i> ; <i>Texas Chainsaw Massacre</i> , dir. Tobe Hooper.	29	Marries. Is encouraged, by Anne, to take up writing again. Begins work on the novel that is to become <i>The Changeling</i> .
1975	Pol Pot and Khmer Rouge take over Cambodia; end of Vietnam War.	<i>Jaws</i> , dir. Steven Spielberg.	30	Anne gives birth to a son, Oscar.
1976		Samuel R. Delany, <i>Triton</i> ; Anne Rice, <i>Interview with a Vampire</i> ; <i>Taxi Driver</i> , dir. Martin Scorsese; death of Agatha Christie.	31	Encounters the works of Borges, falls under their influence.

Year	Historical Context	Cultural Context	Age	Life and Writings
1977		<i>Saturday Night Fever</i> , dir. John Badham; <i>Star Wars</i> , dir. George Lucas; <i>Close Encounters of the Third Kind</i> , dir. Steven Spielberg; death of Charlie Chaplin; death of Groucho Marx; death of Vladimir Nabokov; death of Elvis Presley.	32	
1978	Jonestown massacre.	Claude Lévi-Strauss, <i>Myth and Meaning</i> ; <i>Halloween</i> dir. John Carpenter.	33	First novel completed, under the provisional title, <i>The Sign of the Black Raven</i> .
1979	Margaret Thatcher becomes British Prime Minister.	Angela Carter, <i>The Bloody Chamber</i> ; Stephen King, <i>The Stand</i> ; <i>Apocalypse Now</i> , dir. Francis Ford Coppola; <i>Alien</i> , dir. Ridley Scott.	34	Taken on as a client by agent, Oswald Straker. Persuaded to change title of novel. It is sold to Ormolu Press.



Year	Historical Context	Cultural Context	Age	Life and Writings
1980		Italo Calvino, <i>If on a Winter's Night a Traveller</i> ; Michel de Certeau, <i>The Practice of Everyday Life</i> ; Umberto Eco, <i>The Name of the Rose</i> ; Julia Kristeva, <i>Powers of Horror</i> ; <i>The Elephant Man</i> , dir. David Lynch; <i>The Shining</i> , dir. Stanley Kubrick; assassination of John Lennon; death of Jean-Paul Sartre.	35	
1981	Reagan becomes President of the US; Personal Computers introduced by IBM.	Jean Baudrillard, <i>Simulacra and Simulation</i> ; William Burroughs, <i>Cities of the Red Night</i> ; Alasdair Gray, <i>Lanark</i> ; Salman Rushdie, <i>Midnight's Children</i> ; <i>Evil Dead</i> , dir. Sam Raimi.	36	<i>The Changeling</i> published.
1982	Falklands War.	M. John Harrison, <i>In Viriconium</i> ; <i>E.T.</i> , dir. Steven Spielberg.	37	

Year	Historical Context	Cultural Context	Age	Life and Writings
1983		J. M. Coetzee, <i>The Life and Times of Michael K.</i>	38	Deaths of Anne and Oscar in traffic accident.
1984		Ian Banks, <i>The Wasp Factory</i> ; Clive Barker, <i>Books of Blood</i> ; Angela Carter, <i>Nights at the Circus</i> .	39	Publication of <i>Ilona Joo</i> . Widespread condemnation of the novel in the tabloid press. Peterkin beaten unconscious by mystery assailant. Spends two weeks in hospital recovering.
1985	Gorbachev appointed general secretary of the Communist Party in the USSR.	Peter Ackroyd, <i>Hawksmoor</i> ; Margaret Atwood, <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> ; Don DeLillo, <i>White Noise</i> ; James Herbert, <i>Moon</i> ; Cormac McCarthy, <i>Blood Meridian</i> .	40	Wins compensation from several newspapers.
1986	Chernobyl disaster; <i>Challenger</i> space shuttle explodes.		41	
1987		Toni Morrison, <i>Beloved</i> ; <i>Hellraiser</i> , dir. Clive Barker; death of Andy Warhol.	42	

Year	Historical Context	Cultural Context	Age	Life and Writings
1988	Bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie.	Peter Carey, <i>Oscar and Lucinda</i> ; Michael Moorcock, <i>Mother London</i> ; Salman Rushdie, <i>The Satanic Verses</i> .	43	Publication of interlinked collection of short fiction, <i>The Seven Circles</i> .
1989	Tiananmen Square massacre; Fatwa issued against Salman Rushdie; fall of the Berlin Wall.	Kazuo Ishiguro, <i>The Remains of the Day</i> ; death of Samuel Beckett; death of Salvador Dali.	44	
1990	Margaret Thatcher resigns as British Prime Minister.	<i>Twin Peaks</i> first airs.	45	Publication of <i>The Shambles</i> .
1991	First Iraq War; South Africa repeals apartheid laws; Dissolution of the USSR; Yeltsin becomes first freely elected president of Russian Republic.	Bret Easton Ellis, <i>American Psycho</i> ; <i>Silence of the Lambs</i> , dir. Jonathan Demme; death of Graham Greene	46	Moves to Glasgow.
1992	End of Cold War formally declared; riots in Los Angeles following verdict in Rodney King case.	Death of Isaac Asimov.	47	
1993	Vaclav Havel elected Czech President; cult compound in Waco, Texas raided.		48	Publication of <i>The Necropolis</i> .

Year	Historical Context	Cultural Context	Age	Life and Writings
1994	Genocide in Rwanda.	James Kelman, <i>How Late It Was, How Late</i> .	49	Returns to London, moves into flat in Highgate mansion block.
1995	Nerve gas attack in Tokyo subway.		50	
1996			51	Publication of <i>Apocrypha</i> .
1997	Hong Kong returns to Chinese rule; death of Lady Diana Spencer in car accident; Tony Blair becomes British Prime Minister; a sheep cloned.	Don DeLillo, <i>Underworld</i> ; J. K. Rowling, <i>Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone</i> ; death of William Burroughs.	52	
1998		<i>Ring</i> , dir. Hideo Nakata.	53	
1999	War erupts in Kosovo; earthquake in Turkey kills more than 15,600; Columbine High School killings.	J. M. Coetzee, <i>Disgrace</i> ; <i>Blair Witch Project</i> , dir. Daniel Myrich and Eduardo Sánchez; <i>The Sixth Sense</i> , dir. M. Knight Shyamalan; death of Stanley Kubrick.	54	Publication of novel, <i>Death and the Labyrinth</i> , and short fiction collection, <i>The Black Arts</i> .

Year	Historical Context	Cultural Context	Age	Life and Writings
2000	Problems with the nascent Northern Irish parliament, dispute over the IRA's refusal to give up arms; Yugoslavian president, Milosevic, overthrown; Concorde crash kills 113 near Paris.		56	Publication of <i>Peregrinations in Eldritch Regions: The Collected Non-Fiction of Simon Peterkin, 1980-2000</i>
2001	George W. Bush becomes 43 <sup>rd</sup> President of the US; September 11 <sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks on World Trade Centre; US and British forces launch bombing campaign against Taliban government in Afghanistan, regime collapses.	Mark Z. Danielewski, <i>House of Leaves</i> ; Ian McEwan, <i>Atonement</i> ; W.G. Sebald, <i>Austerlitz</i> .	57	
2002	Terrorist bomb in Bali; UN Security Council passes resolution calling on Iraq to disarm.		58	
2003	Second Iraq War begins.	Dan Brown, <i>The Da Vinci Code</i> .	59	Deaths of parents. Publication of <i>Dust</i> .
2004	Devastating tsunami in Asia.	Susanna Clarke, <i>Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell</i> ; Philip Roth, <i>The Plot Against America</i> .	60	

Year	Historical Context	Cultural Context	Age	Life and Writings
2005	52 die in terrorist bombings in London; earthquake in Kashmir region kills more than 80,000; Saddam Hussein put on trial; Hurricane Katrina wreaks terrible damage on Gulf coast of US.	Death of Saul Bellow; death of Arthur Miller; Suicide of Hunter S. Thompson.		13 <sup>th</sup> March, Peterkin disappears, under strange circumstances, from his Highgate flat.

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# The Wanderer

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A True Narrative<sup>1</sup>

**Goin' down the road feelin' bad,  
Well, I'm goin' down the road feelin' bad,  
Oh, I'm goin' down the road feelin' bad, Lord, Lord,  
And I ain't gonna be treated this a-way.**

***Traditional***

**To the hoped for, though doubtless chimeric reader<sup>1</sup>**



## Prologue

Dusk is gathering, but the grey canopy overhead is breaking up, and I hope to be able to continue my labours into the night by the light of the new-risen, full moon. I am sitting on the deck of the rusting hulk I have made my home: a cargo freighter that, wrecked long ago, now moulders, listing, keel buried in silt, at the edge of a broad estuary, the mouth of a river known in earlier times as the Thames.

I turn to look west. In the past few years the skies have been tinted myriad baleful hues; tonight the sunset is ochre and bile. Silhouetted against it are the remnants of a vast city; my febrile mind imagines them the scattered bones of a race of giants.

The light of civilisation has long since departed this place.<sup>1</sup>

The city whose picked carcass the last of the waning light is throwing into stark relief, was once known as London. It is a name whose origins are lost to the roiled past; a name not merely said, but incanted, a word from a black rite; a name that must still haunt the dreams of the degenerate local tribes, perhaps the one thing tethering them to the proud race of men who, in former times, made their home there.<sup>2</sup> Before rootlessness was forced upon me, I was one of those mettlesome denizens of bygone days.<sup>3</sup>

In the midst of those ruins that jut from the western horizon like crooked, rotting teeth, I found preserved in a glass case, in what appeared to be a museum of antique curiosities, the typewriter and paper on which I am producing this account. When I recognized the orthographical characters on the keys I was overjoyed; my mother tongue has not been spoken for millennia.

Pondering the preceding sentence, I realise I am not sure for whom I compose this – perhaps only for myself, or possibly for the devil who has been hunting me tirelessly. It is

highly doubtful that there is another soul living who will be able to understand this manuscript, still, I will write as if there were; to admit to myself that, aside from my tormentor and myself, none shall see the fruits of my exertions, would make it an unendurable task. Since I feel compelled to undertake it, I will pretend. I will address you often and cordially, my reader, less to ingratiate my pitiful efforts, than to conjure you into existence by invocation.

My harried and woeful existence began millennia ago, when I was but twenty-nine years old. Since then I have travelled the world over. But as the earth, which has completed countless circuits of the sun since many of the things I will describe occurred, always returns to the place from which it set out, my errant peregrinations, despite the imponderable distances travelled, have brought me back again to the scene of the events I wish to recount.

Though I know it will be a tiresome and enervating task, I have decided to embark on the composition of this memoir now because I have become convinced, in recent years, that history is drawing to a close. The tainted aether is just one of a number of harbingers of the world's demise. Though I know I have placed myself in danger, it felt only meet to return here to London to set down my tale. And besides, it is my birthplace, and it has been crying out to me, calling me home.

For many thousands of years, I hid among the remnants of the Tibetan civilisation, the impregnable Himalayas my ramparts. While other peoples I have encountered, suspicious of my ceaseless youth, have driven me away, the natives of that region treated me with kindness. I became adept at their language – a sometimes harsh, though frequently poetic tongue, punctuated by sibilance and guttural clicking – often traded goods, and twice spent – attempts to stave off a loneliness that had become unendurable – many years living with them.

Those mountain dwellers practice beliefs recognisable as a decayed form of Buddhism, and still hold with a doctrine of eternal return, which, given the many auguries of the apocalypse, would seem absurd.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps their fidelity to ancient tenets can be explained by

the fact they are, in that part of the globe, sheltered from some of the more horrific omens: the seething seas turgid with dead fish, the howling dust storms, and the caustic rains which defoliate forests and ulcerate the skin. However, although the Himalayas are sequestered, there are still portents to be seen: the mountain climate has not proved impervious to change – I can recall a number of occasions when thaws in the depths of winter caused devastating avalanches; and the shades in the skies are perhaps stranger and more garish there than elsewhere. Thus it would seem mere obduracy, even in that haven, to deny history is at a close, and to claim the principle that governs existence is cyclical. Their creed, though, is less foolish, I have to own, than that of the age I was born in, which held sacred the notion of the ineluctability of advancement, both of organisms and human knowledge. I can testify history does not move towards one great goal; from time to time the deck is shuffled, that is all. Indeed, given all that I have observed in my long, long life, I must conclude the notion that perpetual return governs existence is not perhaps wholly implausible. Maybe the Himalayan tribes' cosmology is the true one after all; these harbingers of the end of days could, after all, be signs of the imminent, catastrophic rebirth of the universe.<sup>5</sup> Even so, I cannot credit the idea of recurrence; if the cycle of time is to begin again it will surely take an entirely different path.

The main reason the Himalayan religion has proved tenacious, where others have faltered, however, is doubtless that it does not require a belief in a benevolent Omnipotence, Omniscience; the world is too cruel for such a faith. I, myself, after briefly considering the existence of God and the validity of conviction in my youth, dismissed these issues from my mind, deeming them to be matters not worth squandering intellectual resources upon. Now, though, the world has waxed so desolate and so quiet these questions loom large in my thoughts once more: it seems to me, were there a God, it would now be possible to hear his breathing in the void. It is not, so I assume either there never was a Deity, or that the earth has been abandoned by its creator.

The sun has set in the west. I look out over the river; its waters seem to have enticed and drowned the straggling rays of daylight, and glow like tarnished gold for a moment longer than seems natural. The corpses of rats, feral cats, and dogs float past.

It is time to begin. I prevaricate only because I have no desire to relive the events about which I feel bound to write. But I cannot put off any longer sending the beaters into the brakes of my brain to flush out cowering memories. These fragments I will shore against my ruins.<sup>6</sup>

It is time to begin.<sup>7</sup>

## I

I have had an eternity to brood over the composition of this memoir, to order my impressions, to consider by what alchemy it would be best to turn incident into prose; yet now, when I come to set down the first words, I feel myself falter. I do not even know at what point to start my story. It is too convoluted, too tortuous.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the proper way to begin would be to introduce myself, give my name. But, as my memory is no better than that allotted any common man and therefore entirely unsuited to immortality, though those events of which I wish to tell were so traumatic that they have been seared upon my brain, I have forgotten much. My retention of names is especially poor: mine was lost to me long ago, along with those of all the others of whom I will write. Hence, those used in the following account have to be fabricated.

After staring up at the wheeling constellations overhead and ruminating for a while, I have hit upon an opening. It is not the beginning, but it will serve. I must write swiftly, without circling, and allow myself to be swept along by the currents of my tale. I must cast my mind back to the night so long ago when I learnt of my cruel fate.

## II

Roused by the chimes of a nearby church striking six o' clock, I looked about me, bleary eyed, momentarily unsure where I was. I had been napping in an armchair in the living-room of my flat while listening to a radio show about the Delta blues. It had been an interesting programme, but as, for nearly two years, I had been plagued off and on by night terrors and was frequently exhausted, I often found myself falling asleep at odd moments. Getting to my feet, and stretching out my knotted limbs, I went through to the bathroom to splash my face at the sink.

From the window I had a good view of central London. I looked out. It was early in the year, and though the hour was not late, it was already dark. Below I could see the strewn lights of the metropolis, while above the sky was clear, and in the east I could see the first glimmering stars of the evening. The mansion house I lived in was in Highgate, partway up the hill, and therefore lifted slightly above the miasma of light pollution that pooled in the city basin. I hoped to be home in time to observe the celestial event that was to occur later that night, a total eclipse of the moon – the conditions looked set to be ideal for viewing it.

I still had nearly two hours before I needed to leave, but I already felt anxious, full of anticipation, unable to continue the work I was then engaged in, a critical essay on Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Lost World*, so pouring myself a whisky, I settled down in the armchair to read from my collected works of Edgar Allan Poe.<sup>1</sup> I find his prose, with its bizarre mixture of the punctilious, the arid, the droll and the macabre, a calming influence. His idiosyncratic genius lies not only in the narratives themselves, but in the way they crystallise some abstract notion. I began with 'The Angel of the Odd', superficially the most frivolous story he ever

penned, though a more engaged reading reveals it to be a poignant account of the havoc alcohol can wreak on the mind.<sup>2</sup>

It had been a pleasant, sunny day, and I had taken a walk across to Parliament Hill in the afternoon. It was blustery and a number of people were flying kites. I spent some time looking out over the city, seeking out landmarks, my eyes returning again and again to St Paul's Cathedral, which resembled the severed head of some bald colossus, buried to its eyes in the rich mud of the floodplain.

The evening's gathering was to take place in a quaint and homely pub in Borough, the Nightingale.<sup>3</sup> An old Victorian drinking establishment, it had retained many period features: it had a public bar at the front and a lounge at the rear of the premises, the space divided by a wooden partition, inset with panes of etched glass; a mahogany counter; a dado of lapis tiles; pie and mash on the menu; and sawdust on the floor. I had chosen this place partly thinking it an apt venue, and partly because I knew that at closing time, though the doors would be locked, the bar would stay open, allowing ample time for the unfolding of the tales we had gathered to tell and hear.

My plan had been conceived a few months earlier. Wishing to ascertain whether there were others who had accidentally strayed into the same ghastly realms as I, I placed classifieds in a number of national newspapers. Sifting through the replies was a frustrating task; many of the writers were clearly deranged, several were mocking. Eventually, however, I whittled the respondents down to six, who I believed had replied in good faith and sound mind. I then contacted them and set up the meeting.

I had seen the veil of the quotidian rent and been left forlorn – a scarecrow, a hollow effigy. My mind had balked at what I had witnessed, yet I knew it was no mere delusion. My loneliness at that time was unendurable; I alienated the friends and family I had not abandoned with an impassivity that was my bulwark against the quailing of my mind. Therefore, the thought of meeting others who had encountered similar horrors was a source of

joyful agitation to me; I found I could barely concentrate upon the eerie narrative of the tale that followed ‘The Angel of the Odd’ in my anthology, and which I had naturally found myself reading: ‘MS. Found in a Bottle’.<sup>4</sup> Finally I turned to ‘The Sphinx’, a story I had, in the preceding two years, found absolutely invaluable as a means of staving off madness.<sup>5</sup> Under its influence all that seems grotesque admits of a rational interpretation; it helped calm even the happy agitation, born of anticipation and impatience, affecting me.

When it was time, I dressed warmly to spite the cold, in coat, scarf, and gloves, then left my flat, locking the door behind me. Little did I realise I should never return. I strolled down Highgate Hill, at the foot of which I could catch a bus that would take me all the way to London Bridge. From there it was a short walk to the Nightingale. It would have been quicker to travel on the underground, but I had conceived, for reasons that will become clear, an acute loathing of all subterranean spaces.<sup>6</sup> When the bus came, I boarded, showed my pass to the driver and went upstairs. I always preferred to travel on the top deck for the view it afforded. The bus drove down Holloway Road, almost deserted at that time, to Highbury Corner, at which point I was distracted by an altercation between the driver and a youth who had got on without paying. The engine, at idle, shuddered. The youth was finally intimidated into getting off by other passengers who were annoyed at being held up, and we were on our way once more. When I looked out the window again the vehicle was on Balls Pond Road. The shabby Georgian terraces filled me with dread. I stared resolutely down at my feet until the bus was on Bishopsgate.

Then, raising my head to look out, I saw office buildings, constructed, according to some strange panoptic rationale, almost entirely of glass. The road was congested and progress was slow. A few minutes later I saw Thirty St Mary Axe looming above me, its tessellating windows reminiscent of the compound eyes of flies.



Finally we crossed London Bridge. The lights of the waterfront buildings were reflected in the river's pitchy surface, like diamonds strewn on a jeweller's blackcloth.

When the double-decker pulled into the terminus, I alighted and struck out for the Nightingale. On the way I passed a vagrant slumbering huddled in a doorway – knees drawn up to his chest, back to the pavement – swaddled in a frayed blanket, a paper cup full of change by his head. On his nape there was a crude tattoo in blue ink. The pigment had bled, and it was hard to make out the image, so I leant in for a closer look. It appeared to be of a sword, with straight crossguards, inverted so the blade hung down. Just then, while I was still bent over him, the man grunted and shifted his position, and, afraid I had been mistaken and he was awake, to cover my gawking I scrabbled in my pocket, drew out a pound, and dropped it into his makeshift alms box. But it seemed he had been asleep after all, for, when the coin landed with a loud chink on the others in the cup, he stirred and opened his eyes. Turning towards me, he pulled out, from beneath his bedding, a pair of glasses, their black plastic frames held together with gaffer tape, and put them on. He was a young man with short, brown hair and a full, matted, reddish beard.

‘Sorry,’ I said. ‘I didn’t mean to wake you.’

He grunted, rubbed his eyes under the thick lenses.

‘I’d just got to sleep.’

‘Sorry,’ I repeated, backing away, anxious to avoid a confrontation.

‘Arsehole.’

I turned and continued at a brisk pace.

When I reached the Nightingale I saw, through the window, erratic shadows on the walls; a fire was burning in its stone hearth. A board, on which was painted a picture of the dulcet songbird the pub was named for, creaked as it swung back and forth in fitful gusts of wind. I

had suggested to the others that we carry a copy of *The Sphinx of the Ice-Fields*, as if we were a book group meeting to discuss it; when I went inside, I recognized, by this token, my party sitting by a fireplace in the saloon at the rear.<sup>7</sup> I had been delayed by the traffic in the City, and it was already a quarter past the hour; it appeared I was the last but one to arrive. I joined the group.

We began by all, in turn, giving our names and occupations. As I had stipulated replies to my advertisement should be anonymous, give no identifying personal details, it was the first time I learnt anything about those I had invited to attend. A young man wearing jeans, a T-shirt, and a suit jacket introduced himself first. His name was William Adams, he was a graphic designer. An attractive woman in her late twenties, with striking red hair and a pale complexion spoke up next – she was Claire Stewart, a legal secretary hailing from Edinburgh. Then came Elliot Wainwright, a well-spoken courteous pensioner from Norwich, with a heavily-creased good-humoured countenance, and a shock of white hair which stood up in disarray. The stylish middle-aged woman sat next to him seemed familiar to me. Her name was Jane Ellis. She described herself as a single mother of two from Blackheath, but as she was speaking, I noticed a characteristic mole on her upper lip and realised why I recognized her – she was the author of a number of popular historical romances who had been much in the public eye until about five years before, when it had been announced she was retiring from writing. Duncan Wolfe followed her; he was a butcher from Glasgow, a sullen-looking man whom I judged to be in his mid-twenties, though his mien suggested much greater age. He looked to have been ravaged by History, had a wearied air, sallow skin, drained blue eyes, and his long, tangled beard and cropped hair were dredged with grey. Furthermore, he was missing an arm, the right, severed quite high, near the shoulder – the sleeve of the old-fashioned, worsted suit he wore was pinned across his chest.<sup>8</sup> I was the last to introduce myself.

Once the formalities were concluded, I explained I anticipated a further addition to the party, for whom I felt we should wait before starting, and suggested I get in a round of drinks meanwhile. There was an appreciative murmur. Then, noting that all the seats around our table were taken, Elliot offered to grab another for the latecomer. After taking orders, I went up to the counter. William and I wanted lagers, Elliot, a light ale, Claire, a vodka and lemonade, Jane, a gin and tonic, and Duncan, a porter. As I was paying the bartender, William came up, tapped me on the shoulder, and asked if I needed a hand carrying the glasses. I nodded and smiled.

We took the drinks back over, and set them down. There was a moment's uncomfortable silence. Elliot interrupted it by pleasantly asking if anyone minded if he smoked. No one objected, so he took a briar and tobacco pouch from his shirt pocket, then set about filling the pipe's bowl with flake he crumbled on his palm. After tamping the weed down with his thumb, he held a lit match to it, placed the stem in his mouth, and puffed furiously. Once the flames had subsided, and the tobacco smouldered a dull red, he took a long pull, ruminatively roiled the smoke around his mouth, let it spill from his mouth to rise like an ascendant haunt, then gave a satisfied sigh.

At first our conversation was stilted and awkward. We were, after all, complete strangers, brought together solely by the uncanny experiences we had undergone. As we sipped our drinks, however, it began to flow more easily. We exchanged inanities and details of our daily lives. For the most part our chatter was without awkwardness, though there were some fraught moments, as there are bound to be when people who do not know each other are gathered together. These were due to insensitivity rather than malice – discomfort caused unawares. A particularly strained moment came when Duncan, who generally seemed taciturn, began expatiating enthusiastically on his trade and the handling of meat, subjects clearly dear to his heart. It appeared he was the only one among us not to notice that Claire, who had already announced she was a vegetarian, wore a sickened expression.

Jane diffused the tension by gently interrupting the dour Glaswegian to enquire about the person whose arrival we awaited. I explained I knew nothing about him or her. As stipulated in the advert, the response had been anonymous. I thought it likely, however, I said, that he or she lived in London – the name of a sorting depot in Clerkenwell had been prominent on the letter's postmark.

Jane nodded.

Talk then turned to a scandal that had recently provoked the outrage of the tabloids: a well-known gameshow host had been photographed taking drugs with a prostitute in a hotel room.

‘Well, I think he’s an idiot,’ Claire opined, after the debate had raged for some time.

She took a weekly gossip magazine out of her bag and opened it to an article discussing the affair.

‘Says here it was a set up, the hooker was paid by one of the red tops. Imagine falling for that! I don’t feel any sympathy for him.’

Jane, her head canted to one side, frowned.

‘Why not?’ she said. ‘Think about it. His career and his life are probably ruined. Though I feel sorriest for the wife. Imagine being married to someone for years and then... But it must be hard to be subjected to media scrutiny all the time.’

William drummed his fingers on the table.

‘It sickens me that such sordid ephemera displaces war, famine, and genocide from the front pages.’

Elliot pinched the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger.

‘In my day you could look up to celebrities. They were decent, moral people.’

‘No they weren’t,’ William snapped back. ‘It’s just their indiscretions were kept out of the press.’

He paused, then said, in a tone more contemplative, ‘Still, you could be right. Maybe it is worse. Celebrities nowadays seem to believe their fame will keep their bodies and souls from corruption whatever their depravities.’

During this exchange, Duncan and I had sat in silence, though, while I followed the discussion with lively interest, seeking insights into my companions’ characters, he sat staring down at his pint, grimacing.

At that moment he interjected, saying solemnly, shaking his head from side to side, ‘The world’s going to hell in a handbasket, right enough.’

‘Oh come on,’ William responded, a trace of condescension in his tone. ‘I didn’t mean that. Things aren’t really any worse than they’ve ever been. Besides, the whole thing’s seedy, but it’s not a great moral wrong, is it?’

‘Oh, it’s not that. It’s just...’ Duncan trailed off and shrugged – a shrug that was somehow an eloquent indictment of the state of things.

‘Things are worse,’ Elliot mused, after a moment’s silence. ‘When I was a boy you could leave your front door unlocked and not concern yourself about it.’

‘But people had less money, and less access to medical care, education, and so on,’ Jane observed, gently.

‘I think it’s pure down to increased immigration,’ Claire said.

Groaning, William slammed down his pint glass, reached into his pocket and took out a pack of cigarettes. He lit one, drawing the smoke deep into his lungs. The smouldering tobacco glowed, ireful.

‘No,’ Duncan replied. ‘It’s not that at all. It’s newspapers, television, and such. It’s an ethical decline.’

William reached out and, with two fingers, slid a glass ashtray across the table, looking through it at the grain of the wood beneath, and moving it jerkily from side to side, as if it were a ouija board’s planchette and he moved it according to the whims of a visitor from the

spirit world. Then he positioned it before him, rested his cigarette on it, and looked up at the butcher.

‘It’s something to do with that,’ he said. ‘It’s the way the self-appointed guardians of morality abuse their power, the way the cultural images we are surrounded by work to subjugate us. No one is free, not even in their leisure time.’

‘I don’t mean to be rude,’ Jane said, leaning forwards, chin cupped in hands, elbows resting on knees, ‘but what sort of graphic designer are you? Aren’t those images your stock in trade?’

‘Well...’ William began, then shrugged, drank a draught of his beer, and took up his cigarette again, tapping off a withered finger of ash.

I spoke up.

‘I don’t think it’s anything to do with ethics or politics.’

‘No? Then what?’ William demanded.

‘Simulation and abstraction. The proliferation of dissolute signs.’

‘What does that mean?’ Claire asked, squinting, at me.

‘Increasingly representation does not refer to anything. Reality is being hollowed out from the inside. The fabric of the world has been rent, and through these tears creep things that come from some alterior, some other place.’

Elliot pulled on his pipe, tapped his head with a forefinger, and smiled. ‘Cuckoo,’ he said, exhaling a plume of fragrant smoke.

Jane fixed me with a glare.

‘Nonsense,’ she snapped.

‘Is it?’ I replied. ‘We’ve all seen that other place, haven’t we?’

‘Aye, pal,’ said Duncan, sounding disconsolate, and patting his stump with his left hand.

‘That we have.’

We chatted for a little while longer, then Jane, glancing down at her watch, interrupted with a remark to the effect we were in danger of losing sight of the reason we had gathered. The person for whom we were waiting had clearly decided against coming, she said. Arguing there was little point waiting any longer, she proposed that, one by one, we recount our experiences to the rest of the group. There was a murmur of agreement. Elliot suggested that we hold on to the empty seat, just in case – which we did. There was general agreement that, as I was the organiser of the meeting, my story should be the first to be told. I protested, but the others gently insisted, and looking round at their expectant faces I realised I had no choice. I, therefore, embarked upon my tale.

‘This all happened about two years ago, now. It had been a very long and tiresome day at work, so...’

### **That's the Way to Do It!**

I had a pint in the Saracen's Head on the way home. It was a cold evening and the breath of the few pedestrians fogged in the air. In the grate, a fire crackled; I was glad of its warmth. A quiz programme was showing on the television in the corner of the room, sound low, but just audible. The presenter – a clean-shaven, jowly old man wearing a suit in that shiny, iridescent fabric favoured by gameshow hosts, but also populist politicians and bouncers – fired questions at a young woman hanging upside down by her ankles from a contraption that looked like a device the monks of the Inquisition might have used to torture heretics. Distracted by trying to keep the skirt of her floral dress firmly clamped between her knees, she was finding it difficult to supply the gamesmaster with correct answers to the simple riddles he posed. There was a cut to a shot of an audience member, a young woman who was crying with laughter. Catching sight of herself on the studio monitors she shrieked, 'She ain't got no knickers on!'

A close-up on the contestant's face, now flushed, followed.

While I sat sipping my lager and looking up at the screen, a bearded old man sidled up and sat down next to me, pewter tankard of ale in one gnarled fist, in the other, an unlit cigarette, loosely rolled and shedding tobacco all over the table-top.

'The wolves are coming back,' he pronounced, in a hoarse voice, knitting his brow.<sup>1</sup>

'Ah,' I replied, noncommittal.

'Mark my words, they're coming back. You can count on it.'

In those days I resented nothing more than being disturbed while trying to drink in peace (now I pine for company, but am denied it), so I turned to the old man, intending to end the conversation, politely but firmly. This, I saw, was unnecessary, however – ignoring me, he



stared intently into his drink with the air of a crone scrying in the leaves at the bottom of a tea cup. I reached under my seat, and took from my bag the novel I was reading, *At the Mountains of Madness*, found my place, and settled back in my chair.<sup>2</sup>

I had read six pages of the fastidious, yet overwrought prose, when I noticed an awed hush had descended upon the establishment. Glancing about me, I found that all gazes were fixed in rapt attention on the television set. Most of the patrons were motionless, their faces drawn and tense, though a couple of younger men at the bar mouthed what looked to be, ‘Take the money,’ over and over as if it were a petition in a litany. I looked up to discern the source of the fascination; on the screen a young man stood before two plate-steel doors, exhorting the audience to help him make a decision, while, at his side, the oily host grinned, and rubbed his hands together.

At that inopportune instant the incongruous, reverent silence in the alehouse was unceremoniously broken by a loud shout. It was a colleague of mine, perhaps a little drunk, who had seen me through the open door and was calling out to me. I turned, desperately gestured for her to be quiet, but she was oblivious to the atmosphere of frank piety.

‘What’re you doing here?’ she called out. ‘We thought you’d gone home.’

The regulars turned to glare at the intruder, their favourite moment of the evening ruined. Out of the corner of my eye I could see the television screen; the male contestant, an expression of bitter disappointment on his face, was being strapped into what looked like a dentist’s chair, while two pert-looking young women, wearing scanty lab coats, attached electrodes to his temples.

I shook my head, then, pressing my lips firmly together, pointed at my mouth and raised my eyebrows. But to no avail.

‘We’re all just over the road in the Sheaves. Come and join us.’

‘Why don’t you?’ the proprietor of the Saracen’s Head growled, from behind the teak bar. ‘Clear off.’

Abashed, I got up and crossed over to the girl. Her name was Rachel; she was short and slim, with blonde-flecked brown hair and startling greenish-grey eyes. She took my hand in hers and looked at me through her dark lashes. My chagrin dissipated, I bent down in mock gallantry to kiss her knuckles and was rewarded with a coquettish smile.

(When I think of that moment now in these desolate surroundings, I am truly heartsick.)

I followed Rachel across the street. We entered the Sheaves, a lively, noisy bar with film and concert posters on the walls, and speakers in every corner playing loud music. I joined the group of my co-workers, who were sitting on sofas around a long table that looked as if it had been bought at a sale of second-hand school furniture; initials and expletives had been scratched into, or written on, the timber. Rachel, who had left the gathering to get money from a cash-machine, explained to the others she had seen me drinking in the Saracen's Head. I greeted everyone, and they seemed glad to have me there. Rachel made room for me to sit beside her.

We drank late into the night, becoming progressively more intoxicated. Rachel flirted with me, sitting close enough for her thigh to brush against mine.

After the pub closed, the gathering dispersed. I escorted Rachel to the underground, we walked with our fingers interlaced. At the entrance to the station we parted, and she kissed me lightly on the cheek.

I did not have to wait long at my stop before a bus arrived, but it broke down before getting very far, on Balls Pond Road. I was tired, drunk, and longed to be in bed, so in spite of the chill and the driver's assurances that another vehicle would be along soon, I decided to walk to Highbury Corner where several routes converged. The night had turned even colder and the air grown damp – a hazy corona engirdled each streetlamp. Maddeningly, perhaps three or four minutes after I had alighted, the bus passed by me; it seemed the engine had capriciously started again. Assailed by the jeers of a gang of teenagers who lent out of the

windows of the upper deck, I bitterly cursed my rashness, infuriated. A minute later I saw the sight that was to change my life forever.

One Saturday afternoon, about six weeks earlier, out shopping in central London, I decided to walk by way of Covent Garden from Neal Street to the Strand. On James Street, I was forced to weave through crowds of tourists queuing for cheap theatre tickets and watching street-performers bedizened as aliens, robots, and classical statuary. Entering the Piazza itself, I heard, over the bustle, the harsh stridulation of a Punch and Judy man's swazzle.<sup>3</sup> It was some moments before I saw the booth itself, tucked away in one corner of the square. Its rococo proscenium was formed by two Corinthian columns on either side of the playboard, over which rampant ivy climbed, and an arch, its keystone ornamented with a carving of Punchinello's head. Three cherubs, each cradling a lyre, sat perched atop the structure, smirking down at the stage. The drapes around the fit-up were blue velvet.<sup>4</sup> A small group had gathered, elderly for the most part. Strangely, not a single child watched the performance. I crossed over for a closer look, intrigued.

The play was part-way through.<sup>5</sup> Punch meted out blows to a man who carried a medicine bag.

'I the medic now!' screamed Punch, striking the other with his stick. 'A little of your own physic will do you a power of good.'

'No more, I pray, Mr. Punch,' the good doctor pleaded. 'I am quite cured now, I swear to it!'

'Oh, but you still look peaky, you bad still. Physic! Physic! Physic! Physic!'

With each repetition of the word, Punch planted a blow on the leech's cranium.

'Mr. Punch, no more. One pill of that physic is a dose, I tell thee.'

'Quacky, quacky, quack, quack,' screamed Punch, like a demented duck, a maddened mallard, chasing the physician around the stage, administering a vicious pummelling.

‘A few more and you’ll not want curing again, quacky, quack, quack. Maybe you don’t feel the medicine inside?’

And with this enquiry the hook-nosed hunchback thrust his stick into the doctor’s guts and the poor man fell down dead.

‘Hee, hee, hee,’ laughed Punch in triumph, casting the body over the front of the stage. ‘Cure yourself now, if you can!’

The antic buffoonery continued as Punch tormented then murdered several more unfortunates, including a horse, a rich man’s servant, a ghost, and two lawmen dressed in tricorn hats, frock coats, and pantaloons. Finally he was apprehended, and taken to court.

As the play became increasingly violent and bawdy I expected protests; in fact most of the crowd stared listlessly. The show was grotesque and lewd, and I felt glad no children were in the audience. During Punch’s trial, crude puns about his protuberant proboscis abounded, and the judge described the hunchback’s mistress, Pretty Poll, as having ‘on many occasions suffered a good length of rod.’ It was a wonder some of the pensioners watching were not mortified.

A guilty verdict was delivered. Punch, sentenced to death, was strung up on a gibbet by a cowed hangman, kicking and screaming to the last.

‘Surely some mistake. I no bad man. I was just having a little fun!’

After Punch’s burial, some twenty minutes after I had walked up to the fit-up, the curtains closed. The others who had been watching the performance shuffled off, but I hung around, waiting for the Punch and Judy man to appear, intrigued to see what sort of person was behind the strange show. After five minutes, when no one had emerged from the fit-up, I crossed round to the back intending to speak to the puppeteer. I discovered the curtain there drawn back, the booth empty; it seemed the Punch and Judy man had somehow slipped away without my noticing.

Over the next few weeks I saw the Punch and Judy booth on a number of occasions in various locations around town. Mostly I ignored it, walking straight past, but occasionally I had a moment to spare and stayed to watch. It appeared the puppeteer was following a script, not improvising; there were minor changes to the dialogue at each performance, but the sequence of events remained the same. In retrospect a number of things ought to have aroused my suspicions: I had not come across or even heard tell of the show before; I never saw the Punch and Judy man emerge from the fit-up, not even to collect money; and I quickly realised there were a number of elderly people who were in the audience at nearly every performance. However, the office was very busy during that period, and, preoccupied, I barely registered these things. Not until the night my bus broke down did I realise an eldritch malevolence was at work.

As I strode, disgruntled, through the silent London night, heading for Highbury Corner, having foolishly got off the double-decker whose engine problems had so quickly been fixed, I saw a primly-attired old woman coming towards me. She was walking along the white line painted down the middle of the road like a high-wire artist on a tightrope: with a steady gait, one foot painstakingly placed in front of the other, her arms flung out as if for balance. Overhead, in a clear sky, hung a moon like a dollop of bacon grease in a black pan. I crossed over and, drawing closer, realised that the elderly lady was in a stupor. She threw her head back, jaws agape, and screeched, 'That's the way to do it!' in a tone that possetted my blood. It was then I recognized her as one of the habitual spectators of the Punch and Judy show.

Letting her go on ahead, I stalked after her, allowing myself to believe I acted out of kindness, that she should be allowed to remain in her trance lest rousing her abruptly caused distress, and that I should follow her to ensure she did not come to harm. Thinking back on things now I realise imprudent curiosity governed my course.

The old woman retraced the route the bus had taken, her progress slow and halting. Due to the lateness of the hour, there were few vehicles about, and the drivers of the few cars and vans that passed spotted the woman in time to slow and, mounting the pavements on either side of the road, skirt her. As the effects of alcohol wore off, the cold began to oppress me, and I started to get a headache. Looking at my watch, I saw, by its eerily glowing hands, that it was half past midnight, the heart of the witching hour.

On Kingsland Road I kept to the shadows, wary in case anyone should see me creeping in the woman's wake and presume my intentions were ill. Near the junction with Old Street, she was passing under a railway bridge when a powerfully built man with close-cropped hair, dressed in a well-tailored suit, staggered out of a club. Sighting the elderly lady, he hailed her, in a slurred East End accent. On receiving no response, he reached into his jacket and took out a gun. I stopped. Calling out again, the man loosed off a round. The bullet caromed off the tarmac near the old lady's feet. When she still did not react, the man began laughing and went back inside the seedy bar. My pent-up breath escaped me in a rush, and I ran to catch up with the woman.

She continued walking down Shoreditch High Street, turned onto Commercial Street, then stopped before Christ Church Spitalfields, and stood looking vacantly up at the heathen obelisk that served as its spire. I also turned my gaze upon it. It towered skyward to rend a veiled ghost of a moon. Long before, I had remarked it seemed to bear down upon an observer as if poised to topple; that night this caprice of perspective struck me as an ill augury – would that I had listened to that mantic tremble and not followed the woman further. I concealed myself in one of the entrances to Spitalfields market and watched her. She was motionless for some time, then, with an agility belying her former arthritic pace, she climbed over the gate, and disappeared out of view behind the church.

Running over, I too scaled the fence, though with greater difficulty than she. I caught sight of my quarry ducking into a mausoleum at the rear of the boneyard.<sup>6</sup> Intrigued, I crossed the small cemetery plot and entered the sepulchre.

Inside there were several memorial tablets and a marble sculpture on a granite plinth: a female angel in prayer, wings outflung, face raised to heaven. Water stains, like the furrows of tears, marked the statue's cheeks, imparting a melancholy aspect to her devotions. In one corner a flight of stairs descended, I assumed, to a crypt. I went down the steps, passing through a narrow entrance into an underground burial chamber. A loathsome scene confronted me, and, unnerved, I staggered back outside, into the fresh air. I stared up at the firmament hoping to calm myself by tracing patterns in the strewn disarray of the stars, but the sky was silted by the city's effulgence, and only the very brightest of them were visible.

Once the frenetic beating of my heart had slowed, I tried to recall my confused impressions of the vault. I closed my eyes and envisioned the scene. There was a sputtering taper set in a wall sconce that gave out a wan light, a large sarcophagus, whose stone surface was covered with intricately-carved designs. In an alcove at the rear of the tomb was the thing that had so unnerved me: a pile of human bones, stacked neatly according to type – mandible with mandible, femur with femur, skull with skull, and so forth. This arrangement struck me as profoundly unnatural, revolting. Some bones had fallen from the shelf and lay scattered on the floor; their confusion did not disturb me half so much as the harmonious disposition of those in the nook.

There had been no sign of the woman. Had it not been fortified by my earlier toying, I believe my courage would have failed me then. As it was, curiosity overwhelmed my apprehension, and I went back in.

Upon a more sedate contemplation the carrion-redolent crypt lost none of its antic horror, but somehow I mastered my dread, and felt able to examine the place thoroughly. I was perplexed. I could almost believe the old woman had lain down to rest upon the jumbled

bones on the floor, and, undergoing the processes of putrefaction and decay in an instant, been reduced to a tawny skeleton and lost among the other relics.

I would, in all likelihood, have quit that dismal place and returned home, had a rat not drawn my attention to a place of concealment so obtrusive, and so macabre, that I had not considered it.<sup>7</sup> The rodent emerged, squealing pitiably, from a small crevice at the base of the sarcophagus. Upon closer inspection, I discovered a slight draught emanating from the fissure and determined to open the lid of the stone coffin. I tried it, but it was too heavy to lift by hand. Realising a tool of some kind would be needed, I cast about and discovered a crowbar in a gloomy niche I had previously overlooked. I supposed that the elderly woman had moved the lid aside just enough to allow her to climb inside and, once lying prone, slid it back into place, though, given her apparent frailty, I was surprised she had found the strength. Taking up the tool, I inserted its flattened end under the cover and set to prising open the stone coffin. I misjudged the weight of the lid, and consequently the force required, and the slab overbalanced and fell to the ground. There was a violent report, and the clay floor tiles crazed about the point of impact.

I was confounded by the sight confronting me when I leant over to look into the box: a flight of stone steps descended into abysmal darkness, a shallow trough worn by the passage of many feet at the centre of each, so they resembled hands cupped to catch alms.

I cannot explain what I did next, save to say, intrigued, my courage bolstered by the drink remaining in my blood, I found it easy to deny my misgivings a voice; there was fanned within me a blazing flame of awe and curiosity that left my fear and reason in ashes. Little or no empathy remains in me for the rash youth I was so long ago. Clambering over the side of the casket, I began to descend the staircase. Once I had left the light of the taper behind me it was black as pitch. I groped my way forward for a long time before I saw a glimmer beneath me. Eventually the steps came to an end and I found myself in a corridor lit by guttering



cressets mounted in brackets. The way ahead sloped sharply downwards. The floor was of packed earth, but the walls and ceiling were of regular stone blocks.

I continued exploring. After some distance the masonry yielded to natural rock, and several times I was forced to scramble over piles of rubble where the roof had caved in. Soon the last vestiges, bar the torches, of man's attempt to tame this dread primeval place were far behind me. I felt as if I had wandered into the burrow of some predacious beast. The tunnel forked a number of times, but I was guided on by the trail of burning tallow, like someone following will-o'-the-wisps into the heart of a treacherous mire.

After squeezing through a passage so strait I had to walk crabwise, I became aware of a freshening of the air, suggestive of an open space ahead. There were no torches on the walls and it was very dark. A noise like wind in a thorny thicket was carried to me on the faint breeze; pausing a moment to listen, I realised it was the awed whispering of an expectant crowd. Reaching the top of a steep incline, I began, cautiously, to edge forwards. A few steps further on, the rock beneath my feet gave way to scree and my legs went from under me. After sliding a short way, flailing, I managed to seize hold of an outcrop and check my descent. By a faint, flickering light, I saw I had entered a vast cavern. The atmosphere was dank and the dark granite walls were piebald with pallid fungi; something cold and glairy dripped from the roof far above into my hair and ran down my nape. Stinking water pooled in hollows underfoot.

A large number of people were gathered on the far side of the cave, but I had not attracted their notice: they were quite a way off, I was shrouded in shadow, and the pattering cascade of grit I had started went unheard. Nearer at hand, several mineral deposits rose from the floor like the gnarled, grasping fingers of some monstrous buried crone. I clambered down to the foot of the slope, then, crossing over, concealed myself amid them.

A large crucible of burning liquid, the source of the fitful illumination, limned the faces of the crowd with red. There were a lot of them, at least two hundred, all elderly, all attired in

their Sunday best. They stared straight ahead as if transfixed, though by what I could not see for my view was obstructed by the head of a rangy man. Sinister cowed folk walked in the midst of the throng swinging fuming thuribles. Then, the tall man, nudged by someone behind him, shifted, and I saw the thing fixed by reverent gazes was the Punch and Judy man's blue-velvet fit-up. The fear I had been gravid with slopped forth. The mutterings of the crowd were suddenly silenced by an eerie, drawn out, 'That's the way to do it!' – the sound of the swazzle keen and raucous – and the play began.

It followed the familiar pattern of mayhem and violence. The throng replied to Punch's asides solemnly and with one voice, like participants in a ceremonial rite giving stock responses. Under the open sky, in heaven's sight, the play's brutalisations and murders had seemed grotesque but comic – now, beneath ground, by a strange light, under an acrid pall, they were diabolical.

Then, towards the end, came a change to the script I knew. After being dragged from the prison cell, in which he had languished for some scenes, and hauled kicking and wailing to the scaffold, Punch did not submit peaceably and take the noose over his head, but began bantering with his executioner.

'Mr. Jack Ketch, if you please, what must I do?'

'Mr. Punch, it is simple enough, place your head,' here he knocked his knuckles against the hunchback's skull, 'through this loop.'

'What for? I don't know how!'

'Now Mr. Punch, no more delay! It's very easy.'

Jack Ketch threw his hands up in frustration.

'Alright. Let me see. Is this the way to do it?'

Here Punch juttet his head forward to one side of the noose.

'No, no! Here!'

'Like so, then?'

Punch thrust his chin out on the other side of the halter.

‘Not so, you fool.’

‘Mind who you is calling fool. It’s tricksome. See if you can do it yourself. Only show me how and I’ll do it directly.’

‘Very well, I will. There, you see it’s easy.’

Jack Ketch poked his head through the hempen collar.

‘And then pull it tight, so!’ shouted Punch, gleefully, seizing the end of the rope and hauling the executioner into the air, kicking and howling.

Ketch’s death throes soon subsided, and he hung lifeless.

‘Huzza, huzza!’ Punch crowed.

He cut the body down, took off the hangman’s hood, placed it over his own head, and laid the corpse out in a coffin he dragged from behind a side-curtain. Two pallbearers entered from the wings, took up the box and carried it off-stage on their shoulders, performing a vile little jig as they did so.

‘There they go. They think they have got Mr. Punch safe enough.’

The hook-nosed killer began to whirl about like a dervish, trolling in a cracked and strident tone.

They're off! They're off! I've done the trick!

Jack Ketch is dead: I'm free,

I do not care, now, if Old Nick

Himself should come for me.

At this juncture the curtain fell. When it parted again the backdrop had changed, now depicting a moonlit Fleet Street, St Paul’s looming behind. Punch stood before it singing and beating time with his stick.

Right foll de riddle loll,  
 I'm the boy to do 'em all.  
 Here's a stick,  
 To thump Old Nick,  
 If he by chance upon me call.

At that moment a head peered around the drapes at the edge of the proscenium. Stifling a gasp of horror, I glimpsed swollen, awful lineaments, malevolent eyes, a loathsome, flickering forked tongue, and crooked ram's horns. The repellent countenance was mobile, quite unlike the fixed expressions of the other puppets. Convulsive shivers gripped Punch and he retreated to the far side of the stage.

'Oh dear!' he exclaimed, his voice quavering. 'Oh Lord! Talk of the Devil and he pops up his horns. That is the old gentleman, sure enough.'

The hideous apparition emerged from behind the curtain and began to approach Punch with a sinuous gait. It was arrayed in a suit of plate imbrued with blood – cuirass chased over with engravings depicting scenes of infamy – and held, two-handed, a broadsword. Though the torso and arms were human, the creature had a goat's legs and a lizard's tail. Its hooves clattered on the playboard. I could have held the puppet in the palm of my hand, but my terror knew no bounds, for it appeared endowed with preternatural animation.

'Good, kind Mr. Lucifer,' Punch wheedled, bowing low. 'Lord and master, most remorseless and cruel, I never did you any harm, but all the good in my power.'

Silent, the fiend encroached still on Punch's corner.

'There, there, don't come any nearer. How are you, good sir? I trust you and your respectable family are well. Much obliged for this visit, but I would be sorry to keep you, I know you must have much pressing business in London town this night.'

Lucifer continued to advance.

'Oh, what will become of me,' wailed Punch.

The Devil swung his sword at Punch; the crookback, stepping nimbly aside, narrowly avoided having his noggin cleaved from his body. Emboldened, he struck out with his stick, but also failed to land his blow. Lucifer retreated, and Punch followed, flailing wildly. But the Devil was the fleeter and more agile of the two, and, after a bit of business in which he laid his head down on the boards, and moved it rapidly from side to side to dodge Punch's swipes, he darted into the wings.

'Hee, hee, hee,' laughed Punch. 'That's the way to do it!'

'Oh no it isn't,' the audience intoned.

'Oh yes, it is,' Punch retorted. 'He's off. He knew what was good for him, what side his bread was buttered. He knew not to fool with Mr. Punch.'

A dread, heartsnatching ululation followed. Punch flung himself to his knees, whimpering.

'Oh, forgive my arrogance, Mr. Devil, sir,' he pleaded. 'I will not ever be bad again.'

The Devil re-emerged from behind the drapery and strode across the playboard, towards the pitiable, cowering Punch. He beat the air with his tail and breathed fire; I was no longer in any doubt the miniature demon was quickened by some malignant, occult force. Standing at the front of the playboard he unbuckled and removed his breastplate, then plunged his sword into his exposed belly, gouging a long rent, from which a sulphurous gleet ran. He drew the blade from his guts and leant on it as a weary greybeard leans on a cane. There was a movement within the wound, then something black as pitch, noisome, and slick with gore crawled forth. It was a dreadful thing, like a black mastiff, but with a pair of bat's wings sprouting from its shoulders. It was mangy, its fur sparse, its flesh covered with sores. Viscid slaver dripped from its maw. I could smell its foul stench even from my distant vantage point; I choked back the bile that rose in my throat.

The hellhound looped across the stage, then pounced on Punch. They were locked in bitter combat for some time, Punch just managing to fend off the hideous spawn with his staff. Then

it seemed to tire, and he gained the upper hand, finally wrestling it to the ground, and pulping its skull. A greenish matter dripped down the front of the fit-up, discolouring the drapery.

‘Hee, hee,’ giggled Punch. ‘It’ll take more than that to bring me low.’

Then he held his arms out stiffly as if clasping a dancing partner, and began to waltz energetically and croon.

I am the famous Mr. Punch,  
I am no damn beginner.  
I’ll eat that curséd hound for lunch,  
Its master for my dinner.

During the fight Lucifer’s injury had healed up and, while Punch was cavorting, he donned the cuirass he had removed to birth the hound. At the end of Punch’s victory ditty, he spewed flames at the hunchback. Punch’s pointed hat and ruff caught ablaze, and he gyred about the stage, moaning. Then, throwing himself down, he rolled on the ground and put out the flames.

When he got to his feet, Lucifer whacked him round the head with the flat of his sword knocking him down again. Standing up once more, Punch clutched his skull and staggered about the stage whimpering. Then, once he had recovered from his daze, rage seemed to get the better of his fear.

‘Why, you must be one very stupid Devil not to know your best friend when you see him. It seems we will have to try who is the best man, Punch or the Devil!’

With that the two antagonists fell upon one another. A pitched battle followed, the combatants a frenzied maelstrom. Punch had the worst of it; the Devil laid him open in several places, and the faces of those in the front row of the audience were spattered with gouts of his blood. Eventually the hunchback collapsed and lay still on the playboard. Satan stood over him prodding his ribs with one of his cloven hooves. But the tricky Punch was

only feigning; he tripped the Devil with his stick, then got to his feet, and rained blows down on his supine enemy – blows so vicious that his staff broke in two. Before the Devil had time to recover from this assault, Punch drove the splinter that remained in his grasp into his adversary's chin. Lucifer thrashed about, blood welling from his gaping jaws, like water from a spring. Soon the curtains round the fit-up were steeped in gore. Finally the diabolic light faded from Satan's eyes, and he fell still.

'That's the way to do it!' cried Punch.

'Oh yes it is,' the crowd responded.

Punch tipped the body over the front of the stage, then frolicked insanely.

'Huzza, huzza, the Devil's dead,' he screeched.

Suddenly he grew serious.

'Friends, I think we have a little problem. A wretched trouble-maker, hidden somewhere near at hand, has watched the show without paying the entrance fee. Oh, he didn't ought to've done that. Oh, no, no, no. What do we do to those who gawp for free?'

There was silence.

'Don't you know? We tear them limb from limb. Get him!'

The bewitched geriatrics began looking about them for the interloper, snuffling as if to scent me. I fled my place of concealment and fled across the cavern to the mouth of the tunnel whence I had entered, turning my ankle a couple of times on the uneven rocks. Scrambling up the slope of loose gravel, I looked back and was relieved to see those in pursuit making slow progress, obstructing each other in their eagerness to catch me.

I did not slacken my pace until I reached the outer air. My heart was a burning coal in my chest, every breath agony. But it appeared I had outpaced the bewitched geriatrics. I climbed over the graveyard fence and began to walk north on Commercial Street, shivering uncontrollably.

I attempted to quell my terror with deep breaths. Soon I felt much calmer; above ground once again, surrounded by the ordinary sounds of the night-time city my experience seemed absurd. I began wracking my brain for a rational explanation for it. Had it been a mere figment? My nerves had been strained by recent pressures at work, and I had slept badly for some months. Or had I been drugged? While I was engaged in these speculations, I heard a low moan behind me. Turning, I saw the mob of old folk shambling along the road, their eyes wild and staring, their arms outstretched, hands set like claws.<sup>8</sup> Panicked, I began sprinting. Behind me the pack broke, loped towards me. There were so many of them that, even if the curse they lay under had not augmented their strength, as I feared – how could the old woman with her wasted and feeble arms have shifted the sarcophagus lid, else? – they would have easily rent me in sunder.

Turning on to Shoreditch High Street, I saw a small gap beneath a hoarding erected to conceal an empty plot – a derelict warehouse that had long stood there had recently been torn down. I lay on my belly and wriggled under before any of the old people had rounded the corner. Holding my breath, I hid behind the boards and, putting my eye to a small knot hole, peered at my pursuers going by on the other side. When they had all passed, I thought myself safe, but then an old woman gave forth a raucous howl; I believe, sniffing the air, she had got wind of me. The possessed pensioners began beating the hoarding with their fists. I turned and ran.

The patch of churned mud was sown with fragments of masonry, and I stumbled a number of times. Reaching the other side, I clambered over the low wall there and found myself on Boundary Street. Turning, I saw one of the chipboard panels give way and the evil horde begin forcing their way through the breach. Fervid in their desire to carry out their master's order, they jostled each other, and fights broke out. I stared, aghast, as one man, with a neat, lank moustache, pushed to the ground a woman who had grey hair scraped back into a bun. She rose again, grappled with her assailant, closing her jaws around his upper arm. Some



of the other elderly devils had formed a rough circle around the antagonists, and were goading them on. The man clubbed the woman with his walking cane, crushing her skull. She crumpled to the floor, her false teeth remaining embedded in the man's flesh.

I sprinted north. I had just crossed the junction with Calvert Avenue when I heard the low, rumbling plaint of a diseased engine, and that wonted call of nocturnal London, 'Minicab?' Turning, I saw a battered, bile-green saloon had drawn up alongside. Ordinarily I would have fled a face like that which stared out at me expectantly through a half-open window – pocked, scarred, and flabbily peccant – but such was my dire situation it seemed flooded with benevolence, and I opened the door and got in without thinking.

Fortunately, I was to find my saviour's ill looks belied a good heart. From my agitation he guessed something awful had befallen me and asked gently if I was all right. I lied, told him that I had been set upon by a gang of knife-wielding youths after my wallet, but running, had managed to outpace them.

Hearing this, the illegal cabby smiled sympathetically.

'It ain't safe, not round 'ere. Nothing new, though, don't you believe that. Always been the same way, long as I known it.'

I nodded. His voice was a hoarse whisper.

'Where can I take yer?'

'Highgate?'

'Sure. What's yer name son?'

I told him.

'Mine's 'Arold. Pleased to meet yer.'

It turned out Harold was a garrulous sort and kept up a jovial banter the entire journey. He held forth on a wide range of subjects, from a recent political scandal to the ailing fortunes of the north London football side he supported. Ordinarily this might have irked me, but that

night I found his inanities soothing. Once my heart had stopped racing, I even interjected the odd comment into pauses in his jabber.

After we had arrived at my flat, and I had paid and gone upstairs, I found that, in spite of all I had undergone, I slept soundly until my alarm went off. Somehow, Harold's banalities had mitigated the night's terrors, made them seem unreal. On being roused, though, after a few moments blissful oblivion, they crowded back in. Initially I thought them the residues of nightmares; once fully awake, I sat stark upright in bed and cried out.

I spent the subsequent few months trying to maintain an outward appearance of serenity, while all within was in turmoil. In the office I was a model of diligence, as I found respite in devotion to my job. Outside work hours I was no longer taciturn and reclusive, but a gregarious instigator of evenings spent drinking in a pub or bar; I found great succour in both companionship and alcohol. All my acquaintances were surprised and pleased by my change of demeanour; I believe I have never been liked as much, before or since, as I was at that time.

My flirtation with Rachel burgeoned into romance. She was a delightful companion, very similar in character to me, though she did not share my tendency to lugubriousness. We had many interests in common and went together to art galleries, concerts, plays and films. While with her, I found it possible to forget my gnawing fears.

However, in spite of all these distractions, my memories of the hellish night remained; a neglected splinter that had begun to fester. There was one evening, when, at the end of a meal I had enjoyed with Rachel, at a cheap, but good, French restaurant, I became distressed by a turn the conversation took and I think I nearly drove her away. We had eaten well and drunk a bottle of wine. After dessert, we were sat awaiting coffees, when Rachel took my hands in hers.

‘Strange. I’ve worked with you for such a long time, but I’ve only got to know you in the last few weeks,’ she mused.

I grimaced, partly mocking, partly in earnest. ‘You’re not regretting it, are you?’

‘Shut up! I just mean we wasted a lot of time.’

At this moment our coffees arrived. We thanked the waiter. I spooned sugar into my cup, stirring absent-mindedly.

‘I guess we have,’ I said, staring down at the froth swirling on the surface of the espresso.

‘It’s just, I didn’t think you liked me, not in that way.’

Rachel pursed her lips and wrinkled her nose, petulantly.

‘Well I did. I would’ve thought it fairly obvious.’

‘Not to me.’ I sipped my coffee.

‘That’s because you’re an idiot,’ she said, smiling.

‘Fair enough. Still, things have happened at the right time.’

‘I suppose,’ Rachel looked down at her fingernails and began to pick at the cuticles, a habit of hers when nervous. Then, as if emboldened by the frankness of the foregoing chat, she asked, ‘Are you keeping something from me?’

I began protesting.

‘Not maliciously,’ she continued, gently, ‘but because, I don’t know, you’re scared of my reaction.’

‘There’s nothing. Really.’

‘But I might be able to help,’ she said, under her breath, staring up at the light fixture.

Then she looked down. ‘Jesus, look at your hands. You’ve got to be careful.’

I glanced down to see what she was talking about. My hands were dry and cracked, the colour of boiled ham. I had been scouring them often, needlessly; a nervous habit.

‘They’re alright. They just get like that when the weather turns cold,’ I lied.

She squinted at me. ‘Please, look after yourself. I worry about you.’

‘Well don’t,’ I said, more vehemently than intended.

‘What?’ she enquired, sounding hurt.

‘I just mean there’s no need,’ I said, placatory. ‘I’m fine.’

This seemed to satisfy Rachel and the conversation turned to less fraught topics.

After the meal, Rachel stayed at my flat. We spent nights together quite frequently, for which I was grateful; when alone, they were a torment.

(Soon it will be dark; the moon is setting out to sea, limning a hoary path on the surface of the water. If only I could walk down it into the peaceful repose of eternity. Instead, I shall sleep fitfully on the grease-stained blankets I have laid out in the wheel-house of this ship. The pallid orb was full when I began this account, it is so again, a pitted pewter plate laid on the blackcloth of night. It seems a month has gone by, though, due to my lassitude and the unvarying routine of my labours, the passage of time has not made a forceful impression upon me – I am grateful to the moon for alerting me to it.

Indeed I am thankful for more than that. All my writing has been done by moonlight: I am wary lest the devil I fear should be seeking me out, so stay hidden during daylight hours and on dark nights am loath to light a taper that might be seen for miles around. Little has happened save in my head and on the page. The barbarians in the vicinity avoid me, perhaps suspicious of my pallor and stature. Their skin is a healthy dusk due to constant exposure to the torrid sun. I burn, but do not tan. And as men no longer attain the height they did in the past, I am head and shoulders above even the tallest of their race. I have several times been ashore to forage for roots and tubers, or to hunt down and kill, with a spear I have fashioned from a carving knife bound to a sturdy branch with twine, one of the small reddish pigs that wander abroad. In a clearing, a little distance from the hulk, I have a fire pit. I am thus able to boil water dipped from the river, to make it safe for drinking, and to cook my food. The rising smoke, lost among the sooty streaks of the local natives’ many fires, would not draw my

enemy's notice. In some ways I am glad that life at the end of time is unremittingly dull; every evening I wake and recommence my narrative where I left off the previous night – nothing distracts me from my task. However, I believe the last truly restful night's slumber I had was in Rachel's arms, long ago. Our short relationship was a time of blithe contentment. But it was soon at an end, for a repressed evil will always seek the surface.)

While I enjoyed that brief period of respite, a spate of barbaric, random attacks harrowed London. The victims were beaten with a weapon thought to be a wooden cudgel – few survived, and those that did could not describe their assailant, having been struck down from behind. There was an appeal for witnesses, but none came forth. Despite an increased police presence on the streets the outrages continued. The city's inhabitants grew afraid to walk abroad after dark.<sup>9</sup>

One evening I had been out drinking in Soho with an old university friend. Slightly inebriated and refusing to be cowed by my fear of the assaults, which was, in any case, as nothing compared to that kindled by the demonic puppet show, I decided to walk to Trafalgar Square, where I could catch a bus to Rachel's house south of the river. My friend was travelling in the opposite direction, and, more wary than I, hailed a taxi. I said goodbye to him, then set out, threading my way through the labyrinth east of Carnaby Street. There were a few other brave, or foolhardy people on the streets: a man in a suit who had presumably been working late; a Chinese restaurateur carrying a brace of ducks; a hot-dog vendor; and a group of American tourists. I had just turned into Wardour Street when I heard, raucous and baleful, Punch's traditional brag: 'That's the way to do it!'

The cry had come from a narrow gloomy mews to my left. Peering into the halflight I saw a person lying, limbs outflung, face down on a pile of black plastic bags. He or she was trembling and making a low mewling sound, like a hungry cat. Straining my ears I also heard a faint soft plashing, only just audible.

I had advanced a few paces into the passage, my mind in tumult, when I stumbled on the uneven cobbles underfoot and staggered against a metal dustbin. Its lid fell to the ground with a clatter. Overhead a curtain was drawn and a shaft of light spilled down to illuminate the midden. The man sprawled there was wearing chefs' whites, black-and-white check trousers. You could play chess on those, I thought. A cigarette smouldered between the fore and middle fingers of his right hand. His skull had been crushed by a vicious blow. Blood dripped from his ears. As I watched the rise and fall of his shoulders petered out, and his whimpering ceased.

As the life went out of him, he slumped, his head turning to one side. A liquid, tallow and amaranth, glugged from the wound, and pooled, nacre and glistening in the folds of the refuse sacks. I turned and fled the alley.

Once I had stopped retching, I called the emergency telephone number from my mobile. I explained what I had witnessed to the operator, and there were uniformed police on the scene within minutes. While several examined the corpse, one interviewed me. She was young, yet composed and efficient. In response to her enquiries I gave an account of all that had passed that evening. She looked at me with quickening interest when I told her of the hoarse yell. She asked me if I was cold, and I realised I was shivering uncontrollably. Escorting me to a nearby bench, she indicated I should sit down, then fetched a blanket.

Not long afterwards an unmarked car containing a senior officer drew up. He was middle-aged, slightly balding, and had a neatly trimmed moustache. After a cursory glance at the corpse in the alley, he directed me to get into his car with him.

He drove me to a nearby police station. On arriving, he escorted me through the reception, along a series of corridors, which resembled those of any modern office building – drab carpet, thin partition walls, grainy fluorescent lighting – and into a small room. Its appointments were sparse: a plain wooden table, on which a cassette recorder sat, and three plastic chairs.

‘Take a seat,’ the detective said. ‘Can I get you anything? Cup of tea, coffee?’

I rarely drank tea, but I felt like one then. I nodded.

‘Which?’

‘Sorry, tea.’

‘Milk, sugar?’ the detective asked, glancing down at my trembling hands.

‘Yes, both, please.’

‘One or two?’

‘One or two what?’

He smiled.

‘Sugars.’

‘Oh. Two please.’

He nodded and left the room. While awaiting his return, I sat musing. I decided it would not be politic to tell of the horrors I had undergone a few months previously – I feared that it might be thought I was deranged.

After a few minutes the officer re-entered the room accompanied by a woman slightly older than him, with wiry grey hair, wearing glasses.

‘Sorry, forgot to introduce myself before,’ the man said. ‘I’m Oliver Hardy.’ He grinned. ‘Eccentric parents. This is my colleague Amanda Hayworth. What’s your name?’

I told him, he nodded, and they sat down. Amanda set the tape machine to record.

They interrogated me at length about the discovery of the body, and my whereabouts earlier in the evening. Their demeanour was formal, but kindly. Once I had recounted all, they went out, leaving me alone for a few minutes.

When they returned they looked thoughtful, sat down at the table again without a word. Amanda rubbed her eyes under her glasses then looked intently at me.

‘You say that just before coming across the dying man you heard someone call out, “That’s the way to do it!” Is that right?’

I nodded.

‘Strange. What do you think that could mean?’

I blanched, shuffled uncomfortably in my chair under her scrutiny.

‘Well, I don’t know. It’s Punch’s cry, from the traditional puppet shows.’

‘Does it have any particular significance for you?’

‘No.’

Oliver sighed, scraped back his chair, got up, and left the room.

Amanda glared at me, silent.

Oliver returned a minute later clutching my satchel, which I realised then I had left at the crime scene.

‘Is this your bag?’ he asked.

‘Yes.’

He reached into it, took out a slim paperback. My mouth was choked with sand and ash. It was a volume on the origins and history of the Punch tradition I had been reading.

‘Well?’ Oliver said, brandishing the book.

Afraid, I blurted everything. I could see they thought it was delirium or fantasy. Once I was done, they requested my patience for a moment and left the room. At that moment it occurred to me they had probably, before I had raved, thought me merely a crank, the detail of the strange cry a harmless embellishment, that they had not entertained the notion that it indicated guilt. I had had no need to tell all. All I had done was give them the idea I was insane.

When the detectives came back in, Amanda sat down and fixed me with a stare, her countenance serious, while Oliver remained standing at her shoulder. I realised they had been wrangling, and guessed, from my superficial impressions of them, that Oliver had been urging good sense, Jane, insisting on following protocol.



‘We’ve discussed what you’ve told us,’ she began. ‘Do you think you could show us the crypt you talked about?’

It appeared she had prevailed in the argument.

‘Yes.’

‘Are you aware that lying to a police officer is an offence?’

‘Yes, I am.’

Amanda nodded, removed her glasses and pinched her nose between the thumb and forefinger of her right hand.

‘Alright. Shall we go?’

The drive to Spitalfields passed in silence. I sat in the back of the car, separated from the detectives in the front seats by a metal grille. When we arrived, my companions took a bolt-cutter to the padlock securing the church gate. We went in, and I led them through the graveyard. Entering the mausoleum, we descended to the burial chamber. There was, this time, no light source; Oliver and Amanda probed the darkness with the beams of their powerful torches. It was as I remembered it: the shelf of bones at the rear of the room, the sarcophagus in the centre.

The crowbar had been taken away, but Oliver went back to the car to get a jemmy, which he set about using to prise the coffin open. It took several apprehensive moments, then the lid slid to the ground with a thud. Amanda shone her torch into the opening. Inside there was a skeleton wrapped in a mouldering shroud and a number of rats feeding on the stripped carcass of one of their own. After striking out at the rodents with his torch to drive them away, Oliver felt about for a secret entrance, but found nothing.

Though they were, by this stage, convinced I was delusional, the serious nature of the case obliged the detectives to follow correct procedure. They called out a team to dig beneath the crypt. An unmarked van arrived soon after and several people entered the mausoleum toting picks, shovels, and a pneumatic drill. I waited in the car, nervous and exhausted. After a

long time had passed, Amanda approached, motioned for me to wind down the window and – her face haggard, the lenses of her spectacles reflecting the sodium glare of the streetlamps – explained that no sign of a staircase or underground passageway had been uncovered. I began mewling like an infant.

The detectives decided not to charge me with wasting police time, I think, in part, because of my pitiable state, and drove me home. They said they would keep my statement on file, that I would be contacted if they needed anything further, and advised me not to divulge any of the night's events, or tell anyone of my speculations. Oliver walked me to my flat, leaving me with a leaflet listing the telephone numbers of several counselling services. As soon as I had locked my front door behind me, I screwed it into a ball, and threw it into a wastepaper basket. I then went through to my living-room, flung myself down on the couch, and, drained, soon fell into a stupor.

The following morning, a ray of sunlight, falling obliquely down through a gap in the curtains onto my face, awoke me from a nightmare in which I wandered the deserted aisles of a vast library, perusing the titles on the spines of the volumes lining its shelves, but unable to comprehend a single word. I went to the front door, stood rattling it for several minutes before I could convince myself it was securely bolted. Walking round the flat, I pulled all the curtains closed and switched on all the lights. I put the heating on, setting the thermostat high, turned on my television and both my radios, then found some parcel tape and used it to muffle the doorbell's clapper, seal up the letterbox, and cover all the flat's ventilation grilles. Afterwards, feeling more secure, I stripped and had a scalding bath, scrubbing myself until my skin was an angry red and bleeding in places. I dried myself and got dressed, then went through to the kitchen, poured out a mug of whisky, and drank it at a single draught.

Of the following two days I remember little. I did not leave my flat. I should have been at work, but did not contact the office, not having the heart to fabricate an excuse to explain my absence. The third time the telephone rang, I unplugged it from the wall socket. I drank

whisky to soothe myself, coffee to remain alert, watched television – changing the channel constantly with the remote control to engineer my own aleatory narrative – ate little, just handfuls of dry cereal straight from the packet, and allowed myself only fragmentary snatches of sleep.

On the second evening, Rachel came to my door, tried, I suppose, the now ineffectual buzzer, knocked, then called out.

‘Where are you? Everyone’s worried! Are you there?’

I kept quiet. Eventually she gave up and went away again.

On the morning of the third day I went into the hall to discover someone had forced a free local newssheet partway through my letterbox. The tape I had stuck over the slot had been torn free. Horrified, I found some matches, set fire to the wadded paper, and went to hide in my bedroom.

I afterwards learned that the paint on the front door, which dated back to the conversion of the building into flats, nearly twenty years previously, was not fire-retardant. Soon the door had caught. Burning smuts spread the blaze, fluttering through the air like baneful moths, and settling on my coatrack and the old sofa I kept in the hallway. In my weakened state the fumes swiftly overcame me.

A neighbour alerted the emergency services. The fire was put out and I was taken to hospital. Fortunately, I had escaped serious injury, though I was treated for smoke inhalation. When brought round, however, my violent babbling forced the medical staff to put me back under sedation. For three weeks I remained extremely disturbed. To avoid distressing other patients I was moved to a private ward. During this time Rachel, members of my family, and a number of friends came to see me. Apparently, I recognized no one, but would seize the hands of visitors in a fierce grip and looking up from the bed, speak to them in a low, desperate tone. I claimed responsibility for the brutal murders in the capital, muttering that devils had possessed me and impelled me to kill.

On learning what had happened to me, the female detective, Amanda, came to speak with my physicians. She told them of the gruesome discovery I had made in the Soho alleyway. When she was informed of the confessions I made when babbling, she explained I was not suspected of any involvement in the crimes and said she was of the opinion that the experience had crazed me. The doctors concurred, recommended to my parents that they give permission for me to be committed for a short time. Initially they were resistant, but, as my condition deteriorated, they agreed.

I spent six months in a sanatorium on the Kent coast, the Fairchild Institute; a foursquare Georgian country residence, constructed from blocks of a light grey stone, with a portico supported by ornamental pillars, ivied gable ends, a triangular pediment pierced with a round window crowning the front, and a gently-pitched roof bristling with a number of chimney stacks. My room on the third floor, in the former servants' quarters, was, despite being cramped, comfortable and well-appointed, containing a double bed, a wardrobe and writing desk, and having the use of a small en-suite bathroom with a shower, toilet and wash basin. From my window I could see the edge of the cliff and, beyond, the Channel, its ebb and flow like the sluggish respiration of some vast creature. On days when the sun was out and light glittered on the water, the sea looked like tarnished gold beaten thin and agitated by an elfin hand.

The routine in that place was unvarying; I lost track of the days. We inmates were awoken at seven in the morning, those of us able to, were left to wash and dress ourselves, those not, were helped by the nurses. Then we were herded downstairs to the refectory, fed breakfast – sometimes cereal, sometimes porridge, often burnt and virtually inedible, very occasionally eggs, bacon, and toast – and given our medications. A programme of compulsory therapeutic activities was laid on in the mornings. When the weather was inclement these took place indoors, and we were set to bread-making or sewing (our handling of needles was

carefully supervised). On fine days we were allowed into the grounds to play croquet or badminton. After a light lunch of soup or sandwiches we were allowed to occupy ourselves until the evening meal. We were permitted to wander the institute's gardens; these were considered safe as they were circumscribed by a high wall surmounted with coils of razor-wire, which put me in mind of the thorny thickets surrounding the cursed castle in 'Briar Rose'. At the rear of the house was a terrace with a row of benches from which, as the terrain sloped fairly sharply away, it was possible to sit and enjoy the prospect of undulating fields of wheat beyond the outer wall; to the left of the building was a kitchen garden, with beds of herbs and aromatic flowering plants; steps led down from the terrace to a large, immaculate lawn, surrounded by shrubbery; and at the far end of the enclosure was a shade-dappled copse, bosky with oak and elm, through which a murmuring rill ran. Dinner was always served early, never later than six, and generally consisted of a slab of grey, unidentifiable meat, and vegetables cooked in simmering water for hours until reduced to an insipid slop. Afterwards we were free either to play board-games or watch television, until nine, when we were ushered up to bed.

Within three weeks I had fully recovered my sanity and stopped taking the drugs prescribed me, pocketing them to dispose of later. Certain that what I had experienced had not been a delusion – the cause, rather than the effect, of a brief period of mental sickness – and, thus, grateful for the sanctuary afforded me by the Institute, I feigned continued distress in order to be allowed to remain there. If emissaries of the dark puppeteer were hunting me down, I hoped they would be frustrated by the loneliness of the spot and the vigilant security.

Curious to discover whether any of my fellow inmates had also been deranged by uncanny experiences, I began asking questions of my opponents during the evening games of scrabble, or draughts. Some of the resulting exchanges were fascinating, but I was disappointed. Among the mundane neurotics, obsessives, and failed suicides who comprised the bulk of the Institute's inmates, there were a few intriguing and disturbing cases: a

paranoiac who believed the government had cameras fitted inside every television set in the country; a teenage girl who, convinced she was the reincarnation of Charles Dickens, was constantly quoting the opening lines of ‘A Tale of Two Cities’, in a low, sonorous tone; a Lilliputian fantasist, who claimed to be hounded by miniature squirrels; and a bearded old gentleman, who spoke solely in an incomprehensible, idiosyncratic language and was periodically seized by frenzies, during which he had to be segregated from other patients. I did not, however, discover one single individual who claimed to have had an encounter with eldritch forces, such as mine.

Convinced that, on the fateful night in the catacombs beneath Spitalfields, I had been afforded a glimpse of some cankerous truth about the world, I regarded all those who came to visit me as fools and was incensed by their complaisant prattle. Most of my friends were repulsed fairly rapidly by my unpleasant and disdainful manner and did not come back after their first few visits. Rachel suffered my truculence and derision for the first four months, coming to see me frequently no matter how appallingly I treated her, or how often I ordered her away. Finally, though, she found it too hurtful. I can still remember our last conversation – it is one of my most painful and poignant memories.

We were sitting side by side on the Fairchild Institute’s lawn. It was a beautiful, clear day, the wind coming off the sea a little cold, but the sun’s rays suffused with warmth. I stared off into the far distance like a blind seer; Rachel was looking at me in concern, stroking my arm. I pushed her away, roughly.

‘I didn’t ask you to come here again,’ I said, without even turning in her direction. ‘Why won’t you just leave me alone?’

‘Why are you so cruel?’ she replied, tearing ragged strips from her fingernails with her teeth. ‘I’m trying to help you.’

‘I’m trying to help you,’ I mimicked. ‘Stop biting your nails. It’s pathetic.’

She began crying, silently. Her indrawn breaths seemed to wrack her.

(I cannot be sure, even with so much hindsight, why I drove her away, for my motives are murky to me. I know I still felt a great deal of affection for her. But I had grown distrustful and burned with resentment for any who were not tormented as I was.)

Rachel's sobs ceased, and she seemed to become calm.

'Don't you want me to be there for you when you're well again?'

I turned to her. She wiped the tears from her cheeks with the back of her right hand, looked at me penetratingly and grinned, a chilling smile that still haunts me. I shrugged.

'Well,' she said.

That was the last word that passed between us. She stood up and walked away leaving me sitting there on the lawn. I saw her once more, a year or so later, walking down Tottenham Court Road. She was laughing, hand in hand with a man a few years older, who looked to dote on her. I hid in a shop and watched her go by through the window, a great sadness swelling in my breast.

I treated my parents with much greater kindness. Their presence was a balm; fortunately, I did not force them to abandon me.

During my time in the Institute I endeavoured to remain distant from the other inmates. But even the most wary may blunder into the toils of friendship, and so it was with me; there was one other patient whose company I fell into often. Colin Elton was a middle-aged man, a former history lecturer at a red-brick university, who had suffered a nervous breakdown when research he had been engaged in for many years was plagiarised and published by a trusted colleague. In the end Colin was vindicated, but too late, the thesis had been promulgated and indelibly associated with the thief's name. It was an apparently brilliant idea which I could not quite grasp, but had to do with the way the Black Death spread its contagion.

Colin's was a fascinating intellect, and we had many long conversations that ranged itinerantly over many subjects. The medieval period was his particular interest, but he could expatiate informatively on everything from architecture to the Eleatic paradoxes. In truth

these were not really dialogues, I was merely attentive and prompted him with queries from time to time. Colin seemed well, for the most part, though his reluctance to talk openly in earshot of any but me evinced his disturbed distrust of others.

One evening, about six months after I was committed and confined to the asylum, I was playing my, by then habitual, evening game of draughts with Colin, when he interrupted a disquisition on the court of Louis XIV to look about him nervously.

‘You can never be sure that someone isn’t writing everything down,’ he said, leaning in close, lowering his voice and tapping the side of his nose with the forefinger of his right hand. ‘They’ve got people everywhere. It’s not safe, even here.’

‘How can you be sure I’m not one of them?’ I asked mischievously.

Colin scowled, cocked his head and squinted at me. Then he picked up two counters from the board, one of each colour, pushed them into his eyesockets and held them in place.

‘What are you doing?’ I asked, irritated.

He grinned.

‘Do you know why the dead in Ancient Greece were buried with coins in their mouths?’

‘No. Can we get back to the game?’

Colin pocketed one of the pieces, or seemed to, then put both hands behind his back. A moment later, he held out his closed fists to me.

‘Choose.’

‘Stop it,’ I said gently, shaking my head.

The academic opened his fingers to reveal a counter cupped in each palm, returned one to the board, then flicked the other into the air with his thumb. We both watched it spin slowly as it arced above our heads. When it descended again Colin deftly caught it in his right hand and slapped it down on the back of his left, keeping it covered.

‘Heads or tails?’

‘Colin,’ I groaned, exasperated.



Looking sour, he got up from the table and walked away, taking the pieces with him. When he reached the door of the room, he turned, held up one of the checkers, and called to me.

‘To pay Charon’s fare.’

‘What?’

‘The boatman. Ferried the dead over the River Styx.’

He was shouting now, his voice hoarse and breaking, his eyes wild.

‘In the late-nineteenth century, in frontier America, it was common to take photos of the recently dead, propped up, surrounded by their relatives. Did you know that?’

‘Don’t be so morbid, Colin.’

He parted his lips, placed the draughts piece onto his tongue, shut his mouth, turned and left. His outburst had upset the other patients in the gamesroom; an old woman sitting in a wicker chair near me, puckered her mouth, began to hoot like an owl and thrash about. Two nurses rushed over to restrain her, another hurried after Colin to make sure he had not swallowed the checker.

That night the historian somehow crept past the staff on duty, found a way over the wall, and threw himself off the precipice. At least that is what was assumed to have happened. Smears of his blood were discovered on rocks at the foot of the cliff, but his body was never found, was presumed to have been swept out to sea by the undertow, and perhaps kibbled by a ferry’s propeller and devoured by fishes.

The pangs of remorse I suffered goaded me from listless stagnation; I felt, sorely, my confinement, and was seized by a desperate urge to leave the Institute, even if it meant placing myself in danger. I called my mother and the following day my parents came to see me. They saw I was well and, that afternoon, signed the papers authorising my release.

I returned to London. In the asylum I had been denied access to news of the outside world, deemed too distressing for the inmates; the first thing I did, therefore, was to find out if there had been any developments in the murder case. I learnt the killings had ceased a few days after I had been committed. The identity of the culprit, or culprits was not known.

My parents had organised for the front door of my flat to be replaced and for the worst of the fire damage to be repaired, but there was still much to be done – I spent my first few weeks at home redecorating. The soot-blackened walls needed stripping and a fresh coat of paint; the curtains had to be washed and aired; I took up the scorched, damp, and mouldy carpets and, discovering the boards underneath in good condition, I sanded, polished and varnished the wood, rather than laying new flooring. Once my work was done I surveyed the results with satisfaction and relief: it felt like a new flat, was purged of its dreadful associations.

My life returned to a semblance of normality. I found temporary work, it did not pay well, but it was enough to get by – I was thrifty. After a few weeks I felt settled enough to contact some of my old friends. I left answerphone messages saying simply: ‘I’m back. Get in touch.’ I went out drinking. Everyone commented on how well I looked, painstakingly skirted mention of my sickness. Actually I still looked feeble, sickly then, but I was starting to feel better. Before too long I was almost well again. Even then, though, I did not attempt to see Rachel; there seemed no way I could make amends for the way I had treated her, and I thought seeing her again would prove too painful a reminder of things I wished to remain buried.

And that is the end of my tale – a return to an ordinary, if hollow, existence, at least until the day, frantic to share my woes with any who might understand, I placed the classified.

Or almost the end. There is an uncanny epilogue still to relate. One evening, perhaps six weeks after I left the Fairchild Institute, I was walking past Smithfields Market in a stupor, listening to music – I distinctly remember that the song playing was Blind Willie Johnson’s

‘It’s Nobody’s Fault But Mine’, a harrowing gospel-blues – when I felt someone tap me on the shoulder.<sup>10</sup> I turned, taking off my headphones. An old man stood there, smiling grimly.

‘Don’t remember me, eh?’ he said.

I shook my head.

‘Well. I was the one warned you about them wolves.’

I recognized him then – it was the man who had accosted me in the Saracen’s Head on the night I saw the infernal Punch and Judy show. Thinking him a phantasm I shook my head to clear my senses. But he was real.

‘Seems you didn’t take heed,’ he said, taking a hand-rolled cigarette from the top pocket of his shirt, placing it in his mouth, and lighting it with a match, struck on the Market wall. A breeze forced him to cup his hand around the flame as he took his first puffs.

‘You’d’ve done well to’ve listened to me,’ he continued, once he had the tobacco lit, speaking without taking the roll-up from his mouth.

But I had turned away. I put my headphones back on and set off at a brisk pace, not once looking back, Blind Willie’s hoarse zeal drowning out anything further the man might have said.

### III

As I type this I can hear stertorous breathing coming from the open door of the wheel-house. My solitude has been invaded.

I feel I should now briefly sketch out the manner in which I have spent my diuturnity.

At first, after learning of my fate, I attempted to live as before, forming friendships, entering into romantic liaisons, taking employment, and so forth. But the obstacles soon became insurmountable. Casual acquaintances quickly became suspicious of the fact that I never seemed to age, and the deaths of those I could take into my confidence caused me great heartache. Finally, I resolved to lead a solitary existence and sought solace in learning and accomplishment. However, when life is endless one feels no sense of achievement – given limitless time, all things can be mastered. Still, reading and playing musical instruments continued to afford me pleasure. For a time I also continued to enjoy sensual pleasures, and, wary of forming any attachments, took them with prostitutes. Eventually, however, even this no longer enticed me. I then felt I had exhausted all of life's possibilities, and listlessness set in.

The apprehension of the ineluctability and imminence of death is a vital condition of being, and, deprived of an end to loom over me, I ceased to be fully human (though I knew I would be found eventually, I also thought – as my pursuer had others to seek, and seemed to wish for a cruel protraction of the game – that dark day could be eluded, perhaps even till aeon's end, if I was canny (a speculation that has proved true)). I also found it wretched I did not age: it is from observing the progress of their own senescence men derive their sense there is change in the world; I, who stay the same, see only stagnation.

For centuries I drifted from community to community, earning enough through casual labour to pay for the necessities: food, clothing, and accommodation. Reclusive, I spent most of my leisure hours buried in books. Though I read diversely, my tastes favoured literature written before my cursing. As they were perused by scholars, these texts could still be acquired from museums and libraries. Indeed, even later on, after the torches of culture had entirely burnt out, it was still possible to obtain them, for many places of learning had housed the large part of their catalogues in underground depositories. These stores had been built to protect the material they housed against the depredations of time and, having entrances that were difficult to broach, were safe from the raids of plunderers. They were often concealed beneath the rubble of the buildings, torn down by suspicious barbarians, that had once stood above them.

During the period of my relative youth (though my flesh does not decay, I still feel the years score me) there was much speculation about technologies that would allow travel to far-flung worlds, something that might have provided a stimulating change. This never came to pass. Neither has any extraterrestrial being visited earth. Either this planet is alone in the universe in being able to support life, or the civilisations of all the populated worlds have, like those of this, always fallen into decadence before attaining the technologies required for the plumbing of the cosmic void.

Eventually, all the earth's denizens fell into barbarity, it would seem, this time, for good, and the planet was shrouded in darkness. Humankind reverted to a nomadic life, and the cities, that had hitherto afforded me anonymity and concealment, fell into decay. I travelled to the Himalayas, in the hope of finding sanctity in desolation and arduous steeps instead.

As I have already described, my existence there, aside from some years spent living with the natives, was that of a hermit. But it was ascetic in its externals merely – thought is a great and complex pleasure, and I surrendered myself to it. I also had my books, whose stock I replenished when required through fraught trips to the archives located in the former seats of

culture. Apart from my eyes, with which I perused my texts, and my hands, that turned the pages, my body seemed at times an encumbrance: a submissive old nag which, despite its usefulness having passed, must still be sheltered, fed, and watered. Occasionally, though, an extraordinary stimulus would restore me to the physical world; my days were not solely spent in contemplation.<sup>1</sup> Once my body had adjusted to the rarefied atmosphere of the higher altitudes, I spent some of my time climbing in the mountains. Not until I finally die (should this release ever be afforded me) will the recollection of the grandeur of the prospects to be had from the higher peaks cease to inspire me with awe. But it is a tranquil place, too. On overcast days, if I felt agitation in my breast, it soothed me to ascend above the level of the clouds, feel the sun on my face, and look down upon the vapours, which seemed, from that perspective, fields of ice and snow. Though I did little during my stay in The Himalayas, which must have lasted over a thousand years, I felt the weight of tedium lifted from my shoulders – strange, since I had always preferred the city. I did not yearn to return to civilisation, and, in any case, doubted it was to be found.

After completing my written account of the tale I related in the Nightingale, I fell ill and lay on my blankets in the dark for two days, agued, delusional, aching in marrow and muscle. I soiled myself in my torment, hawked up grumous blood, and felt as if a succubus sat astride my chest, for I could not get my breath. Febrile visions persecuted me: Rachel knelt by my pallet, but, when I reached out to her, recoiled and spat; I heard again and again the screech of a swazzle, and saw Punch gyring, beating his stick in time to an off-key dirge; Colin Elton stood before me, plucked his eyes from their sockets, and held them out on his cupped palms like offerings; and a figure, swaddled in shadow, loomed down at me, and bellowed:

‘The others are dead, there’s only you left, and now I’m coming for you. I’m coming to tear your heart out.’

I thrashed, writhed, sweated, then, this morning, the fever relinquished its grip. I lay fatigued, sprawled on a bed become a sty. The first thing I did was stagger painfully down the gangplank and across the estuary mud to the water's edge, to wash myself, my clothes, and my blanket. I stripped, waded out a little distance, and crouched down; the river was pleasantly cool. The sun, low and diffused by a haze, was orange, the sky cerulean, and, as it is rare to see such wholesome colours in these days, the earth's last, I rejoiced. I began to feel myself again, the last traces of my sickness dissipated. Turning my back to the shore to look out across the broad reach, I splashed my face with brine to wash away the bile dried in my beard.

Looking over my shoulder, a few minutes later, I saw someone coming toward me, at a run, across the flats. My first instinct was to think I was discovered at last, and, not wishing to meet death naked, stood to retrieve my clothes. As I did so, I saw the approaching figure was only a local tribeswoman, and a habituated modesty forced me back down into the shallows, covering myself with my hands. Reaching the spot where I had piled my blanket, trousers, and shirt, the woman stopped, and, staring at me unabashed, began gesticulating and jabbering in the ugly tongue the peoples of the region speak. I realised for her to have overcome the terror of me her people seemed to have conceived, her situation must have been desperate. However, I felt incapable of empathy – staring at her listlessly before waving her away.

Standing her ground, she continued to remonstrate in a language incomprehensible to me. Half-heartedly, I splashed water at her. She began to cry, tears beading her lashes. She was, I guessed, in her late twenties, and attractive: the petulant curl of her mouth was endearing and she had a lithe frame wreathed in long, bold-red tresses. I felt my resolve weaken as I stared at her. I had the strange impression I had seen her somewhere before, which I initially found disconcerting, though on later reflection I realised it likely simply due to the fact that she had been one of the natives comprising a hunting party that, a few days before, had passed close by the hulk, and which, cowering behind the bulwarks, I watched go by. Doubtless her

streaming oriflamme of hair had caught my eye. After the custom of her race, she wore a knee-length shift of animal hide. She made as if to remove this garment, perhaps hoping to persuade me to give her whatever it was she wanted by offering sex, but my carnality has long since withered, and I looked away in disgust. I now wonder whether I misread her gesture. In any case, she shouted, dredged up a handful of clay, and threw it in my face. By the time I had wiped my eyes, she had reached the reed beds, and was soon hidden from view.

After finishing my ablutions, I got out of the brackish water, dried off in the sun, and dressed, feeling restored. Strolling to the clearing where I have my firepit, I fried, in a skillet I had found in the ruins of London, then breakfasted heartily on, strips of smoked pork and drop scones made from ground oatmeal. Afterwards, I went back to the boat and spent the rest of the day reading over and correcting what I had written, the morning's incident forgotten. With dusk's approach, I stopped work, went again to the firepit, kindled, then smothered a fire and roasted some vegetables in the embers for supper. After eating, I returned to the hulk, took up my banjo and went to sit on the bowsprit. Like the typewriter, this instrument had been on display in the museum in the abandoned metropolis to the west, sealed in a hermetic case. It was therefore in good condition, having been saved from decay. I sat dangling my feet over the water with it in my lap, picking the melody to the migrant farm workers' lament, 'Goin' Down the Road, Feelin' Bad', an old plaint of the indigent and persecuted against hardship, closed hearts, and the dust of the trail.

In a canebreak, which lay across the mudflats from the ship, chirring crickets accompanied me.

As I played my hands began to ache, no doubt a lingering trace of my malady. Whether I had contracted the illness by contagion, perhaps from one of the blood-sucking insects that choke the air at dusk, or from contaminated water or victuals, I do not know, but it was certainly one of the worst I have ever endured; I am certain it would have killed an ordinary man. If only I could have died; I feel shackled to this life, which has long ceased to offer me



anything other than tedium and suffering. It might seem that these two states are opposed, that my trials must at least offer a respite from boredom, but unfortunately they do not. I have already described how aeonian life renders many joys meaningless, friendships cannot endure, achievements are hollow; it also saps extremity's vigour, for adversity merely stretches my days, and misery bloats my nights. Time, for me, has no wings.<sup>2</sup> There is an early twentieth-century gospel song whose lyrics I can still recall, which talks of laying one's burden at the feet of the Lord. I find the notion almost unbearably poignant; if only I believed there was a God who could relieve me of the weight of undying flesh I must carry about.

I was lost in reflection for a time and, on looking up, saw a throng careering through the marsh weeds, a little distance up river. Standing, shielding my eyes against the dying sunlight, I attempted to make out what was happening. As the rabble drew nearer, I noticed a figure out in front, chased by the others. Stones were being thrown. The breeze carried an accusatory clamour to my ears. A moment later I realised it was the young woman who had approached me as I bathed whom the others harried. Her face was contorted by terror. As I watched, one of the hurled rocks struck the side of her head, cutting her scalp, which began to bleed. Then she was running past the ship, the pack at her heels. I remembered I had seen a similar scene just after taking up residence on board the hulk and surmised the tribe punish those who offend against their code by banishing them to fend for themselves, and presumably to die of hunger and thirst.

Such are the customs of the last-days men, the end-of-the-world men.

The young woman tripped and fell, and the mob were suddenly upon her, pummelling and kicking. I saw a tribesman's snarling face upturned, spattered with gore. A wail rose from the prostrate form. This pitiful cry roused in me long torpid compassion.

I climbed on to the gunwale, stood balanced precariously, and yelled wordlessly down at the scrimmage.

All heads turned towards me. I spread my arms, attempting to appear imposing, yawped again.

The persecutors paused for a moment, then continued to mete out their vicious beating. I felt a momentary impotence; I knew I needed to act quickly, or the woman would die. Then, with little deliberation, yammering, I threw myself over the side of the vessel, and plummeted towards the ground. It was a drop that would have killed any mortal (and would that it could have ended my life), but, though when I struck it was agony, and I sank deep into the mud, I swiftly clambered from the sump my impact had made and charged the natives. They had watched, transfixed, my fall, and, on seeing I had survived it, dispersed and ran howling for the shelter of a stand of bulrushes. The young woman lay where they had left her, limp, broken, the silt around her darkened with her blood.

I carried her, barely conscious, on board the ship and laid her out on my bedding. I ministered to her injuries, swabbed her cuts clean. Then, leaving her to sleep and, I hoped, to recover from her ordeal, I came out on deck to write up the day's events.

It is now the evening of the day following that on which I rescued the young woman. At first she tussled and wailed, her brow very hot. I sat by her bedside, nursing her, moistening her lips with fresh water. I thought she would die. After some hours, however, the danger seemed to pass, and she fell back on the bed in an attitude of repose. I came out on deck to prepare myself a frugal repast. I think it best that I leave her to rest, and, before I lose impetus, continue with my labours.

#### IV

On the evening of the gathering in the Nightingale, when I had finished relating my tale, I sat back, took a sip from my pint, and glanced around at the assembled company, to gauge their reactions. Elliot looked concerned, Jane nodded, her expression serious, Duncan scowled, Claire seemed bemused, and William attempted to cover a smirk by fishing for something in his eye. Claire spoke first.

‘Who’s Blind Willy Johnson?’

I turned to her, slightly taken aback.

‘A blues musician, but that isn’t important,’ I said, impatiently.

Then I fixed my gaze on William.

‘Why are you laughing?’ I asked, striving to conceal my irritation.

He strove to control his mirth.

‘Nothing, really.’

‘Don’t you believe me?’

He paused to light a cigarette, before nodding. But the corners of his mouth still twitched.

‘Haven’t you experienced something similar? Or else, why are you here?’

‘Hey, calm down.’

I grimaced, looking away.

‘Don’t tell me to calm down,’ I muttered.

Jane, anxious to avert a confrontation, asked a question.

‘Did you ever see the booth again?’

I swigged my drink, ‘No, I haven’t, thank Christ, otherwise I’d be back in an institution.

But, look, I want to know what he,’ I pointed at William, ‘found so amusing.’

William sighed and ran his hand through his hair.

‘You know. Blind Willy?’

‘Oh, come on! Don’t be so childish. I’ve just told you about an experience that has destroyed my life.’

William appeared contrite.

‘I know, I know. My life’s over too.’

‘Okay, tell us about it,’ I challenged.

‘Fine.’

He lit another smoke from the stub of the last one and was about to begin his narrative when Elliot interrupted him. As he spoke wisps of pipe smoke curled about his features.

‘My son was killed in those attacks.’

Then he fell forward, his head in his hands, and began, quietly, to sob.

Claire’s jaw dropped, Duncan pursed his lips, tugged at his beard. Jane reached out and put her hand on Elliot’s shoulder.

‘I’m so sorry,’ she said.

‘I’m sorry too,’ I broke in. ‘I didn’t mean to...’

Elliot sat back, wiping his eyes.

‘Don’t be silly, lad. How could you know?’

‘Yes, but...’

‘The police never could tell me anything,’ Elliot continued. ‘Now I know why.’

We all watched as the pensioner, with trembling fingers, tapped out and refilled his pipe, then lit it. Looking past his shoulder, I was disconcerted to notice a cover of an old issue of Punch hanging in a frame on the wall, the eponymous character glaring out at me impishly.

A man approached our table and asked to borrow a spare ashtray, breaking the tense silence. He was middle-aged and wore a three-piece, pin-striped suit, and a pink tie; I took him to be a solicitor or city banker. William told him to go ahead. As the man reached over,

his sleeve rode up, revealing an ostentatious gold watch and a tattoo I recognized, with a frisson, as identical to the one inked on the neck of the young homeless man I had inadvertently woken earlier in the evening. I noticed that William blenched when he saw it, let his cigarette fall to the table.

Once he had gone, Jane addressed Elliot.

‘Do you want to talk about it?’

‘I don’t really, no. It’s got no bearing on the events I want to tell you about.’

While this exchange was going on, Claire pulled a compact from her purse and, looking in its small mirror, which threw a patch of fairy light on her face, reapplied her lipstick. I stared, incredulous.

William spoke up.

‘Elliot, do you want to tell us your story?’

The pensioner smiled.

‘Why don’t you go ahead with yours?’

‘Well,’ William stammered, seemingly affrighted.

Then he seemed to recover his composure. He was staring over my shoulder; turning, I saw the suited gentleman leave, apparently he had only been fetching the ashtray for a companion on the way out.

‘Alright,’ William continued. ‘This all happened about a year and a half ago now. I had spent an evening with a friend in a pub in Hampstead, and, a little drunk, decided to walk home...’

## The Lamia<sup>1</sup>

It was one of those rare nights in late May when, after several weeks of warm weather, the North Wind rallies for one last, desperate campaign, and there is ice in the air. William and his friend had been drinking in the Spaniards, an inn at a point where the road narrowed; in bygone days the haunt of highway robbers. When they left the pub there was still a little light left in the sky; though the sun had long set, dusk lingered. Therefore, imagining himself in no danger, William decided to cut across Hampstead Heath, to the Gospel Oak Lido, from where he could walk through Dartmouth Park to his flat on Junction Road. He was looking forward to getting into his warm bed, in which his girlfriend, Catherine, would doubtless already be sleeping peacefully. His friend was planning to catch the Northern Line back to his flat in Balham, south of the river, and was heading in the opposite direction, towards the tube station. William walked with him a little way, then they parted company by Whitestone Pond, on the edge of Hampstead Village, exchanging childish feints, taking their leave with curt valedictions, 'Fuck off, then,' 'You fuck off.'

After his friend had started off down the hill, William stood for a moment contemplating the pond. In earlier times, it had been a watering hole. He pictured a team of horses, weary and drenched in sweat after drawing a carriage from Cambridge or Northampton, slaking their thirst in long noisy draughts, their breath fogging in the cold air. Beyond the pond William could see Jack Straw's Castle, a pub whose clapboard cladding, he had often thought, would be more in keeping with a colonial New England setting than a north London one.

On his route to the edge of the parkland, William cut down a short cobbled street. He passed a butcher's van making a late delivery of meat to a restaurant. Its rear doors stood open, and inside were a number of skinned, gutted, and headless carcasses hanging from

falcate hooks. He pinched his nose against the reek of the slaughterhouse (at this point in William's tale, Duncan shook his head, muttering something under his breath; everyone ignored him). A man with a harelip, wearing a white cap on his head and a cruor-smirched apron emerged from the door of the eatery's kitchen, crossed over to the vehicle, took down a dead pig, and lifted it onto his shoulder. Turning to walk back to the restaurant, he smiled, nodded affably at William, who returned the greeting. On the back of the hand the butcher held the meat in was a blue tattoo, blurred, difficult to make out, perhaps depicting a knife. William noticed it because of the way it contrasted with the red provenance mark printed on the pork.

A few steps further on, he was hailed by an elderly woman wearing a nightdress, hairnet, and curlers, who was leaning out of the ground floor window of an incongruous 1970s concrete block of flats.

'Excuse me,' the old lady called. 'Have you seen a black cat?'

William stopped, unconsciously scratching his chin, as if pondering the question.

'What, ever?'

The woman frowned disapprovingly.

'No, tonight, near here.'

'Can't say I have.'

'She's fairly big. Has a mark on her chest a bit like an 'r'.'

'No. Definitely haven't seen it.'

'Oh.' The pensioner looked downcast. 'She always comes in for supper at nine, but I haven't seen her this evening. There's a nasty tom next door who'll try and get in the flap if I don't lock it soon.'

'I see,' William said, idly pushing a chocolate wrapper towards the gutter with his toe.

'That's not your rubbish, is it?' the woman asked, her tone suddenly sharp.

'Er, no.'

‘Well, perhaps you’d be good enough to find a bin for it.’

Thrown off guard, William bent down and picked up the litter.

‘Thank you, young man.’

He was turning to go, when the old lady mused aloud.

‘Where can that cat have got to?’

‘I don’t know,’ William replied, though not at all sure a response was expected or required. ‘Perhaps it’s out hunting birds.’

‘Oh no, she wouldn’t do that. Jemima’s a good cat.’

‘Right you are.’ William tugged an imaginary forelock. ‘Anyhow, best be off.’

He went on, leaving the senile old bat babbling and tutting to herself. Once out of sight he threw the wrapper down on the pavement.

On reaching the Heath, he walked through a sandy dell, hemmed in by boscage, and emerged into a large open area. At its heart was a marshy slade, which a sign informed him was the Hampstead Heath sphagnum bog. As he stood gazing, a low gurgle rose from it that for some reason filled William with a nameless anxiety. He turned away and walked swiftly off.<sup>2</sup>

Following a footpath around to his right, he reached a gate and, passing through it, entered another glade. He continued following the track, which ran around the outside of the clearing, along the treeline. Crows were roosting in the branches overhead; their harsh clamour filled the air.

The meandering, pale-gravel path led into another spinney. Under the bowering interlaced limbs of the trees – oak, birch, and several other varieties William did not recognize – it was gloomy, the faint light filtering through the interstices enough to see by, but not enough to dispel the bugbears his imagination conjured forth. He had been wandering through the grove for some time when a rustling sound transfixed him.



Peering into the undergrowth he saw a pair of baleful red eyes staring back at him. Blood beat in his ears. He froze, pictured a wolf leaping for his throat to rend him asunder with tooth and claw, a murderous lunatic, wearing clothing stitched from scraps of former victim's skins, rushing him, brandishing a meat cleaver, and a ghoul lumbering towards him, a keening ululation issuing from its worm-eaten lips. Then a coarse laugh broke the hex, one of the 'eyes' described an arc in the air and blinked out, and he smelt cigarette smoke. A woman, naked from the waist down, stood up, stretched, and scratched her crotch. Noticing William on the path, she clapped her hand to her mouth to stifle a scream. Her companion got to his feet, hastily zipping his fly.

'Oi, you little fucker!'

William broke into a run and did not let up or look round until he was back out under open sky, his lungs aching. Then he glanced over his shoulder. He had not been followed. Still shaking, he laughed at his own foolishness, then continued on his way at a brisk pace. Darkness was encroaching, and the first stars peered down from heaven's vault, early arrivals into a theatre, impatiently awaiting the drama to be played out on the earth's stage. The moon had risen, cut like a nail paring.

About halfway across the Heath, William emerged from a stand of beech to see, ahead of him, a gathering on the summit of Parliament Hill. Thinking it safest to skirt it, William struck out from the path, looking up at the group silhouetted against the darkening sky. Three riders, holding burning brands aloft, trotted their mounts back and forth, surrounded by a tight knot of people on foot.

In the gloaming, William did not notice a fallen branch, tripped over it and fell, landing awkwardly on his wrist. His cry of pain drew the attention of the party on the rise, and a drawn-out, 'Halloo!' was sounded. The men on horseback rowelled their mounts and charged upon William, those on foot running to keep up. Before he could get to his feet, he was penned in. The horses were massy, had wild rolling eyes, and pitchy coats; the proximity of

their hooves was terrifying, their stench, rank. Accoutred in heavy barding, they sounded a carillon as they shuffled skittishly. The men astride these destriers were likewise clad in plate and had the visors of their helms lowered. By the light of their torches they examined William's prostrate form. After some moments, one called out in a deep, carrying voice.

‘‘Tis not our quarry.’

William assumed the knight who had spoken to be the leader. While his companions' suits of mail were fairly plain, his was ornately adorned, enamelled in black, the cuirass engraved with an image of a wyvern preparing for flight, and the helm plumed with a sable ostrich feather. The armour of his steed was also tinted black and similarly decorated.

He addressed William.

‘Something direful is abroad on the Heath this night. Seek out shelter, while you can.’

The chargers nervously pawed the ground, and William could only catch fitful glimpses, through their moiling legs, of the rabble following the knights. They were a disparate company. William saw two teenagers with facial piercings, several suited businessmen, four construction workers, still wearing their overalls, hard hats and reflective jackets, a group of young women in short skirts and perilously high heels that sank into the turf, a glamorous middle-aged woman in a designer evening dress, a number of white-haired pensioners, and three men who seemed vagrants, had full, matted beards, and wore shabby cast-offs. None were costumed in the fanciful period garb the riders were bedizened in.

The knights backed, turned their mounts, and rode a little distance off to hold council. A man came forward from the mob to help William to his feet. Taking his hand, the graphic designer saw it was the butcher he had passed earlier that evening.

‘What’s going on?’ William asked.

‘You’d best stick with us,’ was the butcher’s oblique reply. ‘It’s not safe out here tonight.’

‘Is this some kind of historical re-enactment?’

The butcher dismissed this enquiry with a sweeping motion of his hand.

‘Will you join the hunt?’ he asked. His cleft lip gave him a slight lisp. ‘In numbers like this we can’t come to any harm.’

William stared at him, bemused.

‘What do you mean?’

‘There’s a monster has its lair somewhere on the Heath. It’s already taken ten victims. We mean to stop it before it kills again.’

William realised the throng had clustered round, were glaring at him. A scantily clad young woman addressed him.

‘It’ll tear your heart right out.’ She clawed at her chest.

His notice drawn by the gesture, William saw a tattoo identical to the butcher’s, just below the girl’s left collarbone. It was, he now realised, a medieval broadsword.

The girl’s friends pointed, cackled.

‘He’s looking at your tits!’

‘So he is, cheeky fucker.’

‘Leave him alone,’ the butcher retorted in William’s defence. ‘He’s alright. He’s one of us now.’

An old man dressed in a tweed suit and deerstalker spoke up.

‘Look here, they’ve reached a decision,’ he said tremulously, pointing towards the riders.

They approached at a slow trot. All turned to face them when they drew near, they stopped, and the knight in black armour raised his gauntleted hand.

Looking about him at the band William realised that many bore the sword tattoo.

The leader began speaking, his tone strident, his gestures impassioned. This seemed to inspire a reverent awe in his listeners.

‘My friends, the beast for which we hunt is not one of God’s creatures, but the spawn of Satan!’

As if to quell the knight's vehemence, a wood pigeon gave forth a pacificatory coo.

'Born in a lake of fire it was spewed forth from the abyss to wreak its havoc upon the world. It must be stopped!'

There was scattered applause, and a murmur of concord.

'It is foul, predacious and cruel, knows no human compassion, and possesses all the unnatural, sorcerous powers which Devilry could gift it.'

William, unaffected by this declamatory oration, looked about him at the party – as one they cowered in fear.

'But we fight for Christ! And this will be our palladium!'

Saying this, the leader drew a broadsword from a scabbard hanging from his warhorse's saddle, and raised it over his head, grasping the blade, so the pommel pointed to the night sky. Then he lifted his torch aloft, held it behind the hilt, throwing the silhouette of a crucifix into stark relief against the hazy glow of the burning taper, the quillon guards of its crosspiece. A cheer burst forth from the mob. William, discomfited by this display of religious zealotry, began, surreptitiously, to move to the edge of the press.

The leader returned his weapon to its sheath, then spread his arms wide.

'We must be as a shining light to purge this land of darkness,' the leader continued. 'We must destroy this evil scourge.'

At that moment, a faint scream was heard, carried on the breeze from the north. William chose this moment to run. He dashed away up the hillside. One of knights leapt into the saddle and rode him down, barred his path.

'After all you have been privy to, you must accompany us until this thing is done. There is no evading your duty.'

'Let me go!'

The knight rested the point of his blade against William's sternum.

‘Nay,’ he said, threateningly. ‘And if you will not come with us of your own volition, you shall be coerced. Should that prove too troublesome, you will be despatched without ceremony.’

William pleaded, but the rider, silent, herded him back to the group.

All had turned to watch his abortive escape attempt. Once he was back in the fold, the leader continued his diatribe:

‘The vile fiend, spawn of hell, must feel the bite of tempered steel this night.’

He cupped his hand to the side of the helmet.

‘That cry was the despairing last gasp of a victim, I warrant it. We must make haste if we are to catch the accursed thing. Let us go forth!’

With the flats of their blades, the knights began to haze the rabble on. William, too afraid to attempt again to flee, was caught up in the stampede.

The hunt rushed on pell-mell, and it was not long before William was struggling for breath and – though it had waxed very chill with the onset of night – sweating profusely. At first he glanced about him, realised the warriors were driving the pack across the Heath, back the way he had come. After a short distance, though, weary, he hung his head and paid little heed to his surroundings. Therefore, the butcher had perhaps been running at his side for some time before he became aware of the man’s furtive attempts to attract his attention.

‘What?’ William gasped.

‘You oughtn’t to have pissed them off,’ the butcher hissed, a look of fear flitting across his face.

William placed his foot clumsily, turned his ankle, stumbled, and almost fell. Reaching out, the butcher grabbed his arm and pulled him up. The ruck had continued to hurtle headlong, and, if he had fallen, he would have been crushed underfoot.

‘They are pledged to protect mankind,’ the butcher continued, after a moment.

‘Really?’ William spat. ‘What are you talking about?’

They then passed under a tree he recognized, by the shape of its leaves, as a horse chestnut, and a fleeting, but clear memory came to him. As a young boy, conker season had always been his favourite time of year, a brief period when he was undisputed lord of the playground.

Every autumn, William set aside a Saturday afternoon for the collecting of conkers. He would spend it throwing a stick again and again into the foliage of a tree down the road from his childhood home, knocking the seeds from its branches. Sitting cross-legged on the ground, he would split the spiny casings, plucking from their corpse-white flesh the prized, glossy nuts. Then he would return home with the small handful that met his stringent criteria. He would roast these gently in the oven for several hours, filling the kitchen with an acrid stench and infuriating his normally indulgent mother, before pickling them. This took several days. William found the waiting intolerable, would constantly go out to the garden shed to the horse chestnuts, which floated in jam jars filled with malt vinegar, like medical specimens in phials. When they were finally ready, William would take great care boring holes in them, clamping them in a vice, and using the narrowest bit he could find, set in his father's hand-drill. Then, after tying them onto lengths of twine, he was ready for combat. As a result of his careful preparation he often won his battles, and was the most popular child whilst conker season lasted. His friends pestered him for his secrets, but he would not divulge them; they were esoteric mysteries, only to be passed on from father to son.

What William recalled that night on the Heath, was the year he was finally bested. That autumn, a new boy had started at school. Short for his age, shy, saddled with the effeminate name Carol, and afflicted with a lisp, he was the target of bullying. Though William was not one of the ringleaders, he often stood on the periphery, chanting taunts and jeering. Then, one cold morning in late October, he arrived at school, with his conkers in a carrier bag, to find a circle of children standing outside the gates. He could hear Carol shouting at the heart of the crowd, presumed the others were tormenting him. But, as he drew nearer, he realised the cries

were cries of triumph. He joined the gathering. A game of conkers was in progress, a look of intense concentration on the faces of the two antagonists, Carol and Steve, the roughest of the school's bullies. The onlookers were cheering for the new boy. William stopped and watched, soon realising the reason for the crowd's unexpected and partisan sympathies – Carol's technique was impeccable, his aim sure, and his conker tough. After two blows the outer shell of Steve's had split to expose its soft, pale innards. Mouth agape, William watched as a third strike shattered it into several fragments that fell to the floor in, it seemed, slow motion.

The pupils cheered, and the bully slunk off, shamefaced. Then a girl standing next to William took his hand, led him forward, and, addressing Carol, issued a challenge.

'Bet you can't beat Will, though. He's the best conkerer ever.'

Intimidated by what he had seen, William attempted to demur, but the group of children intoned, 'William the Conkerer', over and over. He sighed, put down his bag, and took out the best conker the tree had yielded him that year, a lustrous slogger he had called Achilles, a moniker inspired by a vivid retelling of the Trojan War with which his history teacher had regaled the class. William approached Carol, feinting. Before beginning they worked out who would take precedence; Carol's conker, auspiciously named Paris, after the destination of a recent family holiday, was a mere two-er, while Achilles, a seasoned veteran, had won six battles. Therefore, William was awarded first go. Carol dangled his chestnut from a hand whose steadiness did not betray the nerves apparent from his expression, while William flailed at it overarm. He struck two clean blows and was beginning to relax and gain confidence, when he made a crucial mistake; the third swing missed, and the strings became tangled up.

'Snags,' Carol piped, gaining the attack.

William's premature belief in the certainty of his victory waned as Carol's conker cannoned several times into his, each impact causing Achilles to fit at the end of its string. By the time William regained control of the match, its sheeny husk resembled the dry, cracked

earth of a riverbed after a long hot summer. On the first attack it hammered square into Paris, but seemed to suffer the greater, then on the second it dealt a glancing blow, and flew off its string into the crowd. ‘Stompsies,’ someone called, and the children began stamping their feet with venomous glee. William picked up his bag, and walked away as quickly as possible, before anyone could see he was crying.

(This part of William’s tale seemed, at the time, a strange irrelevance. I remember the puzzled looks that passed between the rest of the company. Claire had taken the gossip magazine out of her bag again and begun openly to read an article; I glanced at it, it exposed an affair between a married footballer and a glamour model.

‘Was the butcher Carol?’ Jane asked.

‘No. As I said, it was seeing the conker tree that brought the memory back.’

Duncan groaned.

William glared at him.

‘It wasn’t a pointless digression, if that’s what you think.’

The Scotsman shrugged.

‘I swear! Wait and you’ll see. My terrible experience was eerily fitted to me.’

William’s bottom lip jutted and trembled, he appeared on the brink of tears. Embarrassed, Duncan looked down at the grain of the polished tabletop, ran his fingers over it.

I urged William to go on with his tale.

He sniffed and put out his cigarette before continuing.

‘When I asked the butcher what he had meant by saying the knights were pledged to protect mankind, he glanced askance at me as we ran along, suddenly cagey...’)

‘We are forbidden from revealing any of the secrets of our order,’ the butcher replied.

Upon hearing this cant formula, the rallying cry of clandestine organisations the world over, William laughed angrily.



(Upon reflection, it now seems to me the exploitation of the natural desire to be granted access to recondite truths was what lay behind the power of civilisation's institutions. Belief was exacted as the price of the aped disclosure of profound, esoteric knowledge.)<sup>3</sup>

‘Well, since I’m here against my will, you could at least tell me what’s going on.’

The butcher frowned.

‘I don’t know any more than you. Some evil thing is loose, and we must kill it.’

The pack were now ascending a steep incline and had slowed their pace. William breathed more easily. Sympathy took root in his breast; the butcher, in thrall to madmen, was surely to be pitied. Still, that emotion was shot through with contempt.

‘What is this? A cult of some kind? How did you come to be involved in it?’

By way of response, the butcher introduced himself, giving his name as Saul. Then he explained that during a dark and desperate time he had turned to theft to support himself. After a spree of muggings and burglaries, he had attempted to break into a church, intending to steal a chalice that, or so he had been told, was beaten gold and studded with precious stones. Spotting a lattice window ajar high above, reticulated strips of lead like charcoal hatchings, panes age-rimed, he had begun clambering up an old tin drainpipe. He had climbed almost to the ledge beneath the open casement before the rusted bolts affixing the pipe to the masonry finally sheared under the strain. As he plummeted, Saul clutched desperately at a gargoyle in the form of a horse’s skull, but his fingers found no purchase on the lichen-mottled stone. He landed, flat on his back, on a marble slab that celebrated the life of a noted Victorian philanthropist. Looking up at the firmament, he lay there a long time in agony, trying to take comfort in the patterns of the constellations. They had offered none, however, merely seemed faint gleams lost in the brutal, cold, and limitless wastes of space. He could not move his legs or arms and believed his spine shattered. Before sunrise he would die, he was sure of that; he could feel his life ebbing away.

But then, as the first light of day gilded the spire that loomed above him, a tall, gaunt figure wearing a habit, features concealed by the pitch folds of a cowl, entered his field of vision, knelt down next to him. Affrighted, he groaned. Reaching out, the stranger laid a frigid hand on Saul's forehead, and, speaking in a deep, hoarse voice, urged him to confess. Though he thought the cowed man a figment, born of the mind's final throes before dissolution, Saul, who had been brought up a Catholic, disburdened himself of his sins. Signing the cross, the stranger granted him absolution. At that instant, feeling returned to his limbs, and the pain faded. He got to his feet.

The stranger then questioned Saul at length about his life. Filled with gratitude, the newly penitent criminal suffered this interrogation without complaint. On learning Saul's name, the stranger pronounced it a heavenly sign. He went on to tell of a fellowship of men and women pledged to ridding London of fiends. Saul interrupted, saying that, though he pledged not to return to crime, he would not turn against his erstwhile comrades.

A grating snicker issued from the depths of the hood. The stranger explained he did not mean human wrongdoers, but true creatures of the Devil, abominations from the Pit.

Saul scoffed.

'But,' the stranger pressed, 'you now know the healing power of God's forgiveness. The Enemy's malignance does not equal this, but it is strong and must be resisted.'

Finally, Saul agreed to attend the society's next gathering; if he remained incredulous, he would be excused.

'I was convinced by the devilry I saw that night,' Saul said to William. 'Everyone here has a similar tale to tell.'

Shrugging, William turned away and peered ahead. The rabble had entered a gloomy grove of serried firs and been forced to slow to a walk. The interlacing limbs above blocked out much of the welkin. Small animals scurried out of their way and trampled stretches of bare earth showed larger creatures, perhaps badgers and foxes, often passed that way. Now in

the van, the riders hacked with their swords at the underbrush – tangled clumps of bramble, purple heather, and bracken fronds. It appeared the knights were searching for something. Underfoot was a carpet of moss and fungi, taut and tensile, like a drum skin.

William did not recognize this part of the Heath, but he surmised they were not far from Kenwood House. He thought of the false bridge that could be seen from the terrace of this hoary edifice, which seemed at first glance to be masonry, ornamented with friezes in the baroque style, and to offer a means by which to cross a small lake, but turned out, on closer inspection, to be merely a construction of painted wood shamming. As a child, William had often imagined a fantastic realm lay on the other side of the water, and that the false bridge would become a real one at the behest of anyone who pronounced the right formula over it. He trembled to think of this fantasy then.

Saul, angry that William had seemingly become lost in a reverie, prodded his shoulder.

‘The guild has a long and illustrious history. It has defended the blissfully ignorant against the encroaching forces of darkness for centuries.’

‘Bollocks.’

William was soon to have cause to retract his withering dismissal, however.

The mob entered a large clearing, and one of the two plainly accoutred knights gave a cry, in which revulsion and triumph mingled, and dismounted.

‘Mark this!’

All gathered round expectantly. When William caught sight of that to which the knight pointed, bile rose in his throat. Lying side by side on the grass were two naked bodies. With horror, the graphic designer recognized the amorous couple whose intimacies he had earlier interrupted. The glade reeked of slaughter. The corpses had been worried and dragged this way and that. The eyesockets were raw, bloody.

The knight who had discovered the dead lovers, was casting about, looking for spoor; he spotted something, loosed a raucous crow from his throat.

‘Clear sign!’

The paladin in black addressed his clutch of followers.

‘The thing will have gone to ground. If we do not tarry we can track it to its lair.’

The lesser horsemen circled behind those on foot and began to drive them forward, while the Black Knight rode on ahead. At first William peered down at the ground as he ran, looking for the trail the hunt was following, but he had fallen to the rear of the posse and could make nothing out amid the welter of prints of those who went before him. The woods were soon left behind and the mob stampeded across a stretch of grassland, careened through a stand of thorn bushes, then came to a sudden halt in a glade before a low granite escarpment, just as William was beginning to fear his heart would burst.

‘There!’ the leader bellowed, indicating a crevice in the rock.

William saw a sallow and pitted human skull half-buried in the mud before it. This grisly relic was canted to one side, its crown stove in. The Black Knight began vociferating. Weary, filled with dread, William paid scant attention, but grasped the pith – the monster, sated, was likely slumbering; a brave man or woman might steal up on it and dispatch it where it slept. The glory of the undertaking was pressed; volunteers were urged to speak up. Many clamoured, pleaded with the paladin to be selected. He chose Saul, and a sigh went up from those disappointed.

The butcher was handed a short dagger by the Black Knight, and entered the tunnel. On the threshold, he paused, turned, and scanned the faces of the throng. Sighting William, he waved.

An uneasy hush fell.

William was in turmoil, his brain reeled. The blood pounded in his ears. A crow came wheeling out of the darkness, alighted on the mired skull, but nothing stirred else. Then – just when William thought he could not endure the wracking tension any longer, would rave and shriek – a wild, pitiful moan and a ragged, exultant howl shivered the silence.

The whimper was soon choked, but the yawping went on for what seemed an age, then faltered, stifled by sobs, as if the lusty glee had been soured by regret, as if two tempers warred in the one frame. The rabble waited, fraught, a short while longer, then a gory gobbet was cast out from the lair – Saul’s head. By some vagary of fate, it came to rest bloodied stump down – it seemed the butcher was entire, just buried to his neck in the mud. The lifeless gaze fixed William with a look of mute appeal, and faint reproach. The stars looked on, unblinking, entranced.

The noises of flesh being rent, bones, cracked, and marrow, slurped, fell upon the ears of the horrified throng.

The Black Knight crossed over to examine the grisly severed head, snatching it from the ground by the hair. He turned it over in his hands peering at it. The skull had been staved, the brains sucked out. Turning to his followers, the knight addressed them:

‘Saul was a good and courageous man. His death must be avenged. We will not rest until we slake the drouthy earth with the demoniacal beast’s lifeblood.’

Eventually William worked up the nerve to speak out:

‘You were the one sent him to his death.’

The rabble turned to glower at him.

‘Yes,’ the Black Knight replied. ‘A glorious death, for which he was well prepared and which he sought.’

‘No death is glorious.’

‘To meet one’s end while carrying out the Lord’s work is to guarantee absolution, and a place at his right hand in heaven.’

‘Only a cruel, callous God would demand such a sacrifice.’

Those standing nearest to William shied away as if his apostasy was a contagion that might spread. The Black Knight drew his sword and levelled it at him.

‘No Knight of the Order should be exposed to such contumely! Smite the unbeliever!’

Cleaving a path through the crowd, one of the two subordinate warriors ambled his charger over to William, and raised his fist.

During William's defiant stand a large black cat had emerged blinking from the cave. It slunk along, dragging its belly in the dirt, and passed underneath the leader's warhorse. Then, just as the gauntlet was poised to strike William, the Black Knight's mount, skittishly backing, trod on the cat's tail. The cat hissed, arched its back, and plunged its teeth and claws into the destrier's fetlock. William noted the feline had a hoary marking upon its breast. Rearing, the charger threw its rider. He landed heavily on his back – the sundered head flew from his grasp and rolled into a nearby bramble thicket. Mewling, the cat ran back into the tunnel.

A silence settled upon the crowd; they looked on aghast. William was saved a beating for the knight who was to mete it out turned to go to his leader's aid. The sable-tricked paladin lay winded, whimpering. Getting his breath back he began cursing in a nasal whine:

‘Aw crap, that hurt. Stupid fucking cat.’

He tried to get to his feet, but, his armour proving too cumbersome, fell back again. Dismounting, his two companions crossed over to help. Once up, he stood for a moment, swaying, before clambering back into the saddle. Then he gestured towards the dark fissure.

‘We must smoke out the monster. There is no shortage of firewood here about. Go, collect some, and bring it back here. We will need greenwood, as well as dry tinder.’

The acolytes dispersed. William, mad with fear, thought it best to comply docilely and accompanied a group, including the young women who had jeered at him earlier, into a small copse comprised of spruce, beech, and elm. One of the girls took a large clasp knife from her handbag and set about hewing limbs from the living firs. Another pinched William's arse and gave him a lascivious wink – afflicted with a numbing lassitude, born of shock and exhaustion, he did not even flinch. He wanted to attempt to run again, but an ache in his chest, and cramps in his leg muscles prevented him. Besides, one of the knights rode back and forth

nearby, keeping vigilance. One of the party asked the girl who was attacking the pine trees what she was doing.

‘The needles are really smoky when you burn them.’ She snorted with laughter. ‘I once set fire to me mum’s Christmas tree with a fag.’

She glared at William.

‘What are you looking at, you dozy fucker? Why don’t you take these,’ she indicated the branches she had already cut down, ‘back over?’

William did so without a murmur.

When enough wood had been gathered, it was built up into a pyre before the opening in the rock, and a truculent teenager, wearing a hooded top emblazoned with the words ‘Swine Grinder’, came forward to kindle the dry grass tucked beneath the logs with his cigarette lighter. It caught, and flames flared up, illuminating the assembled mob’s leering faces with a hellish glow. The spidery shadows they threw danced jerkily behind them, fitfully aping their motions; this rabble of charred forms seemed a swarm of ailing wraiths tempted, by the flames’ lure, to cross into this world from some ghastly, dread, alterior place where all is clinker and ash. Then the fire began to reek, and yellow smoke billowed up, which the prevailing wind blew into the tunnel.

The company, drawing close to the warmth of the blaze, sat down cross-legged on coats spread over the damp sward, or squatted on their haunches to bide awhile. Sandwiches, Thermoses of tea, packets of cigarettes, and hipflasks containing whisky or brandy were taken from satchels, rucksacks, and pockets. But they had barely got themselves settled, only taken one or two bites, sips, or puffs, before the wait was at an end. A wailing was heard and a creature tore through the sooty shroud before the cave mouth. It was a large serpent with a pair of shrivelled arms, yellow eyes the shade of brimstone, squamous skin, and tattered, leathery wings. Its lips were drawn back over teeth like needles, set askew in raw gums. Vainly beating its withered pinions, it writhed in the dirt, desperately seeking to escape, but in

vain – it was penned in. A general moan of horror went up, but William for some reason felt a fledgling sympathy. The Black Knight rode over and drove his brand into the demon's face. It screamed out in pain. Another of the knights then snuck behind it, pinning its tail to the ground with his blade. Convulsing, it vomited up a mess of offal.

‘Witness the ease with which an agent of darkness is overcome by men of pure heart!’ the Black Knight hollered.

The demon squirmed, impaled. William wondered whether it might be able to shed its tail and flee, as some lizards can, but it appeared it could not.

It was more pitiful than frightening.

‘Now we need only someone to come forward and dispatch it,’ the leader continued.

The throng roared, clamouring to be chosen.

‘I hear your petitions and am loath to disappoint you, but it is my will that the newest member of our order should seal his loyalty by finishing the monster. Come forward.’

The Black Knight's extended arm sought William out.

Protesting, he was pushed forward by the mob, then stood swaying before the whining demon. He hardly noticed when a sword was placed in his hand by one of the knights. The crowd began chanting, ‘Off with its head!’, over and over. The demon stared up at William, a look of entreaty in its baleful eyes. Then it spoke, its voice a feeble, sibilant hiss.

‘Pleasse, ssspare me. You know not what it iss you do.’

Its struggles served only to open up a long gash in its flesh; the sword held, and it could not tear itself free. A yellow ichor welled up and pooled, seething, on the earth. Nauseated and faint, William felt a wave of pity for the fiend.

‘I won't do it,’ he said to the Black Knight. ‘Find someone else.’

‘No. It must be you. What is your name son?’

William did not reply.



The Black Knight rode over, unsheathed his sword, held the naked blade to William's throat.

'Pray, tell me, what are you called?'

Afraid for his life, William gave his name.

'Auspicious. We will call you William the Conqueror.'

He raised his voice, 'Friends, this young man's name is William. We will call him the Conqueror.'

He clapped his hand to his chest, the cuirass knelled as if hollow.

'Now, cut off the thing's head, and make an end of it.'

The demon darted out its forked tongue.

'I just wisssh to be left in peassse. I mean no harm.'

'But,' William said, in a low voice, wiping his brow with his left forearm, 'haven't you killed tonight?'

The sword was so heavy he could barely lift it, but he could not release it from his grasp. It cleaved unpleasantly, as if the hide-bound handle had been grafted to the flesh of his hand. He dared not look down. Dull aches ran up his arm.

'I mussst eat. But I chossse only thossse whossse livesss are worth leassst.'

William groaned.

'I'm no killer,' he said and turned to walk away.

The Black Knight glared at him.

'Yes, you are.'

He began repeating, 'William the Conqueror,' over and over. The rabble took up the refrain. William was deafened and disorientated. Outstretched hands clutched at him and pushed him back towards the demon. He pleaded, but was drowned out by taunts, catcalls, and chanting. Then the demon, tears running down its face, vomited again. In among the swill William saw something glinting. It was a ring of singular design, three separate bands of

silver braided together. He bent down to pick it up, wiped it clean on his shirt, and held it to the moonlight, hoping against hope not to discover a certain inscription. It was there, though, in cursive script, just as he had dictated it to the jeweller a few days before his girlfriend's last birthday. It was Catherine's ring. A wail of anguish tore from his throat, and, finding strength in his pain and rage, he swung the blade.

The mob fell silent. The demon began to speak, but got no further than, 'It'sss not...', before the sword cleaved through its neck. The head scythed through the air, the lips still moving, though soundlessly. Landing in the claggy soil, its jaw fell still, and its eyes dulled. A bilious fluid, from which a rank, acrid stench rose, spewed from the carcass's raw stump, the wings fluttered limply. William backed away. He found he was now able to let the weapon fall from his grasp. Its blade had begun rapidly to corrode. A cheer went up. Emerging from the cave mouth the black cat, a screeching ball of fur, pounced on the demon's head and began clawing at its sightless eyes, concealing the face from view.

Then the body's scaly skin began to boil, giving the impression of a myriad life beneath the surface, and a horrifying metamorphosis took place.

(I believe that most of us sitting in the Nightingale, listening to William's tale, had already guessed its conclusion; his tears and the pitiful break in his voice were telling. He paused here a moment, snivelling. Jane went to the bar and bought him a whisky. Looking about me I wondered what the other patrons made of our gathering, and noticed that, strangely, we had attracted little attention. I supposed they may have assumed us to be a bereavement or divorce counselling group. Whatever the case, no one paid us any heed. I now wonder if it was not perhaps a charm or spell of some kind that rendered us unremarkable. Once he had downed the short, William found the resources to continue.)

The tremors that wracked the dead demon's frame sloughed off swathes of its hide. William stood agape as the naked, decapitated body of a woman was revealed piecemeal. When a scaly scrap came loose, uncovering a pale belly strewn with scattered moles and,

below, a tangle of gold, he ran over, roughly grabbed the cat by the scruff of its neck and tore it away. He took up the severed head in his chalice hands. Staring down at the features, he recognized, mauled, contorted by fear, Catherine's face. The cat, clawing at his shins, raised a cry; beginning muffled, like the sobbing of a child, it rapidly swelled into a wailing, banshee shriek. Looking down at the feline, William saw that the marking emblazoned in white upon its chest was a rough outline of a gallows.<sup>4</sup> He kicked it from him in horror, then fell to his knees in the mire, fulminated at the heavens. The stars, their appetite for tragic suffering sated, hid themselves demurely behind a veil of cloud. Wiping his eyes, William looked about him and saw the clearing before the bluff was deserted. He had not heard the others leave, and there was no trace they had ever been there at all, no tracks in the dirt, no sandwich wrappers, or cigarette ends. It was as if they had simply faded out of existence. He was alone, completely alone, on Hampstead Heath, clutching his girlfriend's sundered head.

## V

It is overcast today, though gaps in the wrack afford glimpses of the sun; now almost directly overhead, its heat is oppressive. In the sky to the east, over the sea, thunderclouds are moiling, like a frenzied herd of bison. No doubt there will be a storm before dusk.

So far today I have eaten a light breakfast of smoked fish, prepared and taken the young woman a bowl of porridge, collected firewood from the shore, and stood a while in the prow of the ship, looking out over the estuary. A gull was dropping mussel shells onto a concrete slipway a little distance downstream, and I watched it for a time.

Since I last documented the habits of my existence at the end of time, I have abandoned, as tiresome and needless, my former strictures about living only at night, slumbering the day through, and not lighting fires on board the hulk. I know in my heart my enemy does not track me by sign, but by some unerring instinct. That I have evaded him for so long is doubtless because he has not wished to find me. I am convinced now that he is coming for me and will not be fooled by feeble ploys.

This morning I also completed my account of William's tale. It has taken nearly a week to set it all down. During that time nothing of any moment has occurred. The girl's condition has improved; she is now able to feed herself, and has twice staggered down to the water's edge to bathe. She is still very weak, though, and spends most of the time resting on the pallet in the wheel-house. I have given this up to her, and, since the weather has held fair, at least until today, have been sleeping on the deck with the night sky my canopy, and the constellations its embroidery. Apart from writing I have done little – foraged for edible tubers and grasses, fished with my makeshift spear. This last I find, in some measure, distracts me from my mounting disquiet; it requires great patience to stand, completely still, waist-deep in

the river, until the fish, perhaps thinking me only a piece of flotsam entangled in river weeds, venture close enough to strike at. I find this enforced inactivity soothing. In some ways the tedium of the last few days has been idyllic, offering me a chance to rest and work without interruption on this manuscript.

Still, I wish something would happen, even if bad; waiting breeds dread in me.

It is now early evening. The threatened rain has not come, but a strong wind is blowing off the sea, and I have been forced to move my desk into the shelter of the lee side of the cabin. The young woman sleeps inside. My brow has been laid open; I have just finished cleansing and swabbing my wound. Blood still seeps through the bandages I have swathed my head in; I can feel a trickle running down my cheek as I type. Though I have no mirror to check the extent of the injury, from what I could tell by looking at my indistinct reflection in the river's muddy waters, by touch, and from the girl's reaction to my appearance, it is severe.

It is almost as if the last sentence I set down this morning invoked the tumult that followed. Made superstitious by all I have suffered, I half believe this machine, my typewriter, to be enchanted. Of course that is foolish, but, nevertheless, I will be wary about what I write in future.

Having spent centuries living like a hermit, passing much of the time in reading and idle reflection, I am easily wearied, my earlier exertions have exhausted me, and I would like to rest. However, since I fear my enemy is closing in on me, I feel I must write this night, though I know it will be difficult to stay awake.

I promise to recount, in full, the afternoon's violence, but I feel I should first describe all that has happened to me, in the last year or so, since I left the Himalayas, my home for at least a thousand years. Besides, my hands still shake – perhaps the work of calling those things forth from my memory will act as a sedative.

When I set out from my mountain haven, it was my intention to travel in vehicles of various kinds scavenged from the vast mounds of derelict technologies that are such a commonplace feature of the earth's current landscape. However, an inaptitude for mechanical things, and concerns about the attention I would draw progressing so conspicuously – worries aggravated by a report one of the mountain dwellers had relayed to me of a man, pallid skin like mine, wandering the region – meant I had to abandon this plan. Instead, I walked a great part of the distance, riding the remainder on beasts of burden found or traded with peoples whose settlements lined my route. The trek was wearying and fraught; I was forced to remain vigilant against attacks by wild animals and cannibal tribes. I armed myself with a tapering steel spar wrested from what looked like an ancient telecommunications rig, wielding it like a lance, though only rarely was I forced to strike with it; most attackers were discouraged by the imposing figure I cut in the sackcloth cowl and ancient ski-mask that I wore as protection from the sun's relentless blaze (which is more intense these days, than ever before), and the uncanny shrieks I uttered as they closed in. Of course I can never be in any real danger (except from the malevolent fiend who is hunting me down) but injuries still cause me pain. One night a mountain lion prowled up to me while I was sleeping, undeterred by the fire burning in the mouth of the cave I had chosen for my resting place, and bit a hunk of flesh from my thigh. Thus afflicted, I awoke, and the beast went for my throat. We wrestled for some time on the grotto's sandy floor, before I finally got my hands around its thick neck and throttled it. I limped on the injured leg for several days before it healed, as all my wounds, however severe, will in time.

I used my makeshift weapon to hunt small creatures, wild cats and dogs, goats, and swine, subsisting on their meat, some of which I cured by smoking and carried with me to guard against lean periods. I supplemented this meagre diet with roots dug from the ground, berries and nuts picked from trees and bushes, and mushrooms. Though I have nothing to fear from poison, on one occasion I accidentally ate a baneful toadstool and was plagued by

figments for hours – I imagined I saw Punch’s battle with the Devil again and had visions of the end of the world presided over by the man who has pledged to torture and kill me.

Crossing the central European plains, I discovered nature had reclaimed the once densely-populated region. Vast herds of buffalo grazed the lush grassland. The few people remaining there, a scattering of nomadic clans, rode on donkeys and hunted the cattle, following their wanderings. The skies were strangely empty of birds. Once, however, I was passing beneath a willow at dusk when a loud ‘oop-ooop-ooop’ cry attracted my attention. On looking up I saw a hoopoe perched on a branch, its pied pinions spread, its long, curved beak darting this way and that, and its vivid, orange crest, the exact shade of the lurid glow lingering above the western skyline, quivering. Another time a lammergeier kept pace with me for several days, wheeling overhead. Finally it was distracted by a sheep’s carcass I passed, and, last I saw it, was soaring on an updraft, as if hung from the rafters of the world, dropping mutton bones on to a small patch of gnarled and pitted concrete, vestige of an ancient roadway, to crack them open and get at the marrow.

I was building up a fire to dry out my garments after crossing the Rhine, when I realised I was being pursued. A man on horseback was silhouetted against the waning light at the eastern horizon. Filled with dread, I broke camp and pressed on, through the night, my clothing wet and clammy, making sure to obscure signs of my passage, seeking a place of refuge. I was fortunate. The next morning, as a diffuse reddish stain spread across the sky behind me, I came across a man-made burrow, perhaps a former military bunker: a cool, dank, underground complex, accessed by a narrow shaft with a ladder bolted onto its concrete wall, the rungs of which, having not been exposed to the weather, providentially still held firm. I wove a lattice of branches cut from a nearby patch of bramble to provide camouflage for the entrance, then climbed down. A little light filtered from the surface through ventilation ducts, and, once my eyes had become used to the gloom, I explored my hideaway. I discovered it to be empty, bar a few metal chairs, and, in a small room with a steel door, shelves lined with

antique tin cans long before warped and bloated by the decay of the foodstuffs they had contained.

I spent four days in concealment, before feeling safe enough to venture back to the surface. On the second I heard the sound of hooves drumming overhead, approaching then fading into the distance, and listening at one of the grilles was sure I scented pipe-tobacco, confirming my worst fears. I remained with my ear pressed to the vent for several hours, but the rider did not return.

I reached the English Channel without further incident, and waded into the water. Forced to abandon my lance, I was sorry to leave it behind – it had served me well. After swimming for about sixteen hours, I fetched up the sight of hoary chalk cliffs and remembered, with sorrow, poor Colin Elton's fateful leap. I made immediately for London, drawn there because I could not conceive of commencing this memoir anywhere else, and by an intuition that, if there was to be a final confrontation, the spirit of the place might confer upon me an advantage. In addition, I was filled with curiosity to see how it had changed. It is also possible that, without my being consciously aware of it, the compulsion I felt to return to the site where things began was influenced by the notion of history as cyclical held by the Himalayan peoples amongst whom I had lived so long.

I saw the city again, for the first time in an age, from a ridge some distance off. Astoundingly, though it had been completely renewed, probably many times over, in the immeasurable period between my leaving and its eventual desertion, as with the philosopher's axe, the original could still be recognized in it. The Thames still wended its sinuous way from west to east, bisecting the metropolis, though over the millennia its course had altered, and its meanders were unknown to me. The tallest structures were, as they had been in my time, clustered just east of the centre, their foundations sunk into marshland, though they were monoliths of a height that far outstripped the skyscrapers of my youth, and rent the clouds. There was a huge glass dome at the heart of the city. Nearest to me, at the southern edge of



the metropolis was a tangle of tenement blocks. An external wall of one of these habitations had collapsed, revealing an interior made up of tunnels and dwelling chambers. It was like looking at a formicarium. Then, with wonder, I recognized a building at the heart of the sprawl – St Paul’s, just as I remembered it, though its dome was riven with cracks and its crown, where a gallery had once jutted toward the sky, collapsed; it looked like a soft-boiled egg caved in by the back of a spoon. As the masonry of the original cathedral would have long since been dust, I presumed this to be the husk of a much later replica.

For some reason I am writing this scene as a poignant homecoming, but the truth is I felt nothing looking down on the derelict city from atop that chine. My heart has calcified in my chest, I no longer feel its throb.

I do not know why the cities sank into desolation. Neither cataclysm nor pestilence forced men to depart them, and the weapons of man’s darkest invention remain listing on their launchpads, mouldering. Perhaps it was simply that the lure of the wild, which had always enticed men ever since they first – weary of wandering, hunting, and foraging – settled the land, corralled beasts for slaughter, and tilled the soil, finally waxed too strong. For centuries after they had abandoned the urban centres, men still visited them now and again to scavenge and loot. Later, superstitious barbarians occasionally returned to lay waste. After a while even these vandals stayed away and the cities were left solely to the depredations of nature and time.

The streets of the place once known as London were just as those of every other former fount of civilisation I have visited – strewn with imperishable dross and desolate bar rats scurrying hither and thither, squealing.

Wishing to see what had become of the area in which I had once lived, I struck out north, down a narrow, mazy roadway hemmed in by towering masonry, so pitted and ravaged by hard rains that, with my eyes narrowed, I could almost believe I walked along the dried-up watercourse of a ravine. As I crossed the city, it struck me that the names on signposts and

fascia-boards above shopfronts were set down in characters I did not recognize, and whose appearance bore little relation to those of the English I knew. I mused on this, but could not come up with an explanation. It was very odd.

Upon reaching the Thames, I searched for a point at which to cross it on foot, but the bridges that had once spanned it were ruinous, a few stumpy piers jutting from the water all that remained, and I was forced to swim. The river was very cold, I had to steel myself as I waded in. Halfway across I trod water for a moment to catch my breath, and, looking down into the limpid water, saw a shoal of charcoal-grey sprat scattering at the approach of a pike.

When I arrived at Highgate Hill I discovered, in an enclosure on the summit, a heritage site; the characteristic architectures of many eras jostled there. I clambered over the perimeter fence and walked down a cobbled street past an Iron-Age roundhouse, a Tudor, timber-frame dwelling, whose upper-storey beetled over the road, a geodesic dome constructed from a substance resembling obsidian, a Victorian terrace, and a stark, late-twentieth-century, concrete tower block. Entering this last I discovered it derelict and vandalised: the decaying period furnishings and trappings were wantonly broken and strewn chaotically; the dank walls daubed with graffiti in an array of gaudy hues – images of tanks, and men and women in outlandish garb, jostled for position with slogans in scripts incomprehensible to me.

At the heart of this region I discovered a museum. The display cases in the sections nearest the entrance had been smashed and their contents stolen, but there were some smaller exhibition rooms towards the rear that had not been plundered. In hermetically sealed cases in these chambers, along with many artefacts whose use I could not fathom, I discovered my typewriter, a handful of spare ribbon spools, several bundles of paper, an antiquated electric torch that incredibly still worked, and my banjo. I also found an old hand-barrow, once used, I supposed, for moving pieces – made from plastic, it had survived intact, and I appropriated it for transporting my things.

I then returned to the city centre to seek out the former site of the British Library. It was my fervent hope, had it remained a repository of knowledge, that there might be found beneath the earth seams of a scintillating ore. I dug in the ruins and was rewarded, discovering an entrance from which, as soon as the seal was broken, a musty redolence of old paper, ink, and leather bindings wafted forth. Subterranean stacks! I spent a while wandering the shelves reading titles by the flickering light of my torch. On that occasion, I only took one volume with me, Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, for I was tired and hungry.<sup>1</sup> It was my intention to return the following day, rested and sated, spend some time browsing, and carry off as many volumes as I could fit in my cart.

Afterwards I entered the vast glass dome, discovering it housed a shopping district. I explored, seeking retailers at which I could outfit myself for the weeks ahead. The atmosphere beneath the vault was stifling – the huge fans that had once circulated the air long since fallen still. I wandered the arcades, foraging, seeking supplies. A dispiriting and profitless endeavour. Despoiled centuries before, the place was miserable testament to the frantic greed of humankind. Most of the perdurable items of any use that remained had been broken during the sacking, and many of the emporia had been entirely emptied of stock by pillagers. An ankle-deep, stinking mulch lay in the aisles of the victualers, in which strange flora grew: gaudy orchids; giant pitcher-plants; and creepers that twined around the struts of the goods shelves and had white flowers, which gave off a cloying, charnel reek. Pausing by a large department store, I saw the arm of a manikin poking from the draff behind a display window and thought for an uncanny and terrible moment someone was buried there.

Surrounded by this evidence of man's immanent rapacity my thoughts turned to those social contracts that, for all their seeming permanence, are always torn up at the first hint of grave danger. Many thinkers have proposed theories claiming to explain the nature of civilisation. Some have taken positive views: arguing that it is the apotheosis of man's social condition; a waypoint on the journey to enlightenment; the foundation stone of the city of

God; or the natural state of evolved man. Others have posited neutral, mechanistic models: that it is one stage in a recurring cycle of human history; or the inevitable response of human creatures to their environment. A few have asserted it is a pernicious institution: an instrument of oppression and exploitation; or a decadent way of living, a fall from the grace that is natural man's. Due to my diuturnity I am perhaps better placed to speculate than any of these philosophers, yet it troubles me to offer my theory – it is too bleak. Yet it would seem the only meet conclusion. Civilisation is nothing but a flimsy veil shrouding the virulent disorder that is the essential condition of existence.<sup>2</sup>

It is strange to relate that while entertaining these dark thoughts I felt my loneliness more fiercely than I had done for millennia. I tried to envision the precinct as it would have been on a busy Saturday, before the exodus, but my imagination failed me. Suddenly overwhelmed by the heat and the stench of decay, I ran to find an exit. Outside my stomach lurched, and, hunkering down, I retched.

When recovered from my nausea, I got to my feet. I had fled the shopping complex without securing any provisions, but nothing, not even the threat of starvation could have induced me to re-enter that fetid place. However, I found I clutched a carving knife in one fist and a skillet in the other, things, I can only think I seized instinctively from one of the heaps of detritus as I bolted. I tested the blade's edge; it had remained fairly keen. Certain these items would prove useful, I decided to keep them.

Standing there in the sunshine, the eldritch lull of the once bustling street weighing down upon me, feeling keenly my isolation, I conceived a perverse desire to return to the place where I had been damned to perdition.

Deciding to wait until the following day, I spent the night in the lobby of a dilapidated hotel in the northern part of the city. After a frugal repast, I slept fitfully on a mildewed couch.

I set out just after sunrise. To cross the Thames, I was again obliged to swim. On reaching the south bank, I stretched myself out on a stony beach to rest and to dry off in the sun. As I lay down, I disturbed a small crab; it scuttled away across the shingle, waving its claws menacingly as it fled, like a craven thug.

Once I had regained my strength, I got to my feet and entered a warren of grim alleyways that lay roughly in the direction I sought. Stark steel and concrete structures wreathed in a pall loomed overhead. The only living things I encountered were rats that scurried brazenly in my wake, waving their naked, prehensile tails.

After wandering lost a while, I came across a chunk of stonework preserved in a glass case. Black and white blocks were arrayed in a chequered pattern. I could not, of course, read the label, but recognized the exhibit as a section of masonry from Southwark Cathedral. I was astonished: time which antiquates antiquities, and has an art of making dust of all things, had, capriciously, spared this fragment of a minor monument.<sup>3</sup> I assumed that it had been excavated from the ground somewhere nearby, and that I was close to the site on which the church had stood. The Nightingale had lain only a short distance to the south-east of the cathedral, so I pressed on towards the rising sun.

A few moments later I emerged into a large square. Once, perhaps, it had been a bright and airy place of cafés and bars, now it was a gloomy grove of yews sprouted from seeds carried there in the entrails of birds, or in mud caked in the treads of men's boots or the frogs of animals' hooves. I knew, somehow, it was the site on which the Nightingale had stood.

I descended a set of steps and passed into the shade of the withen boughs. I felt compelled by a malign force to enter that dread copse, though every sinew of my body resisted this rash action. Perhaps ten paces in, the toe of my right shoe struck something. I waited a moment for my eyes to adjust. Once they had, I saw a corpse laid out on the ground at my feet. It was William. I knelt down and put my hand to his cheek; it still retained some warmth, and I surmised he was but recently dead. He lay on his back, dressed in a threadbare,

dishevelled, pinstriped suit, his feet bare, his shirt torn open. I wondered if he had been kept locked up without sustenance for a time, for he was wan and starveling, his ribs protruded, and his sightless eyes bulged. He had been hobbled by duct tape wrapped around his ankles; his arms were outflung, but red marks on his wrists showed they had been likewise bound; the roll of tape whose origins I could not guess at, and several used scraps, lay on the ground beside his body; traces of glue adhered to the skin around his mouth and nose, and the beard growth there was patchy, as if clumps of hair had been pulled out; his torso was covered with small lesions caused by burns; a large number of cigarette butts had been painstakingly arrayed around his head, side by side, to form a halo with all the stubbed ends pointing inwards (I started on seeing these, for, though the tobacco plant grows wild in many regions of the globe, it has, for many millennia, been considered a poison, which indeed it is, and not smoked – I have not seen it cured in all that time); and around his neck had been tied a venomous serpent, of some species I did not recognize, which was still alive, though sluggish, and had a pair of diaphanous wings, taken perhaps from a child's toy, secured to it with a knotted ribbon – evidently this creature had been striking repeatedly at William's face, for his cheeks were lacerated. There was a deep wound to the region of the heart – this I presumed the death blow. As I well knew, there was only one weapon upon the earth that could have dealt it, and that was in the possession of the evil being who had cursed William with immortality in the first place. Once I had overcome my initial horror, I crushed the snake's skull with the heel of my boot, then walked away leaving poor William's carcass to rot in that dank spinney. I envied him his death, though not the manner of it.

I headed back to the hotel, where I had left my possessions. Knowing the demon who had hunted me down through the centuries was close at hand it was my intention to quit London that very afternoon, but I lost my way, and it was only after several frantic hours I finally found the place. By then dusk approached, and I thought it would be safer to spend the night holed up, than risk travelling in the dark when my enemy might steal up on me.

Over supper I thought about what I had seen that day. It was easy to reconstruct what had happened to William; I quailed to realise the pleasure that could be afforded a sadistic torturer by a victim who feels pain, but cannot die. Only one aspect puzzled me at first: the traces of glue about William's mouth and nose. After all there was no one to hear him cry out. It was not until later, lying awake between snatches of sleep on the damp sofa, I understood. To me it seems the most repellent aspect of the torment. William had been made to pull deeply on a cigarette before his lips and nostrils were sealed with tape; therefore he was prevented from exhaling the acrid smoke from his lungs until his persecutor willed it. How many times this was repeated, and how long William was left to suffer each time, I did not wish to contemplate.

The following morning I got up before sunrise and went outside. It had rained heavily during the night, and, as the drains were blocked with dead leaves and other refuse, there was standing water in the street. The clouds had dispersed, and, though to the west the sky was still sombre and star-strewn, a faint haze in the east heralded the dawn. Under the hotel's portico the ground had stayed dry, and I sat down there to breathe cool air deep into my lungs, hoping to dispel the lingering wraiths of my direful night visions. Just as I was beginning to feel calmer, a small rodent scurried past my outstretched legs. Following its course with my eyes I saw something that set my heart fluttering against my ribs like a trapped bird. On a sett, not far from where I sat, was a scattering of ash – the burnt remnants of a bowlful of pipe tobacco.

Possibly it had been left there to intimidate me, though I am more inclined to think it was mere chance the scourge who hunts me had chosen that spot to shelter from the storm and have a smoke; I doubt he would have let me escape had he known I was there. Mortally afraid, I packed my few things and set out, pushing my cart before me, walking east. I chose this heading on a whim – the rising sun seemed obscurely to symbolise sanctuary.

Reader, you may be wondering why I, whose life weighs heavy (in fact, I am unsure the condition that is my lot should be termed life; my state is nebulous, liminal, like that of the fabled undead), fled from one who means to kill me. I would gratefully yield to almost any death, but he means, as you have seen, to submit his victims to excruciating torture before he dispatches them. His cruel ingenuity fills me with terror, and I will never stop running, even if it means I will never be able to lay my burden down.

It was fully day by the time I left the city's outerlying regions behind me. Cresting a rise I saw the Thames meandering sedately through meadowland studded with poppies and buttercups and decided to follow its course.

On the evening of the following day, I realised, from the broadening of the channel and the tang of salt in the air, that I was approaching the river's estuary. I saw a vast, tenebrous mass looming out of the mist on the opposite side of the water. It was this battered hulk on which I now sit, writing. I was shocked by its size, far too large a vessel for these waters. As I drew closer I saw, stencilled on its prow and stern, in what must have been hardy paint to have survived the weathering of millennia: 'Ark'. Why it was written in characters I could read, and whether or not it was a name whose meaning had been lost to those who gave it, I do not know. It seemed auspicious: I felt it a sign that this was the place in which I should await the coming apocalypse.

I decided to swim across the broad reach and assess whether the ship would make a fit dwelling place. Providentially, even laden, the barrow in which I toted my things floated. Still, the crossing was exhausting, and, on reaching the far bank, I had to rest a while to get my strength back. Once recovered, I sought a means of gaining the Ark's deck. To this end I made a circuit of the vessel. In doing so, I encountered no tokens to indicate how it had come to its pass: whether it had been caught in rough seas out on the Channel, was forced to seek shelter in the calmer river mouth, and ran aground in unexpected shallows; or was deliberately sunk, at a time when the water level was higher than it is now. Whatever had occurred,



however, the anchor had been dropped before the wreck or scuttling; half sunk into the sludge, a little aft of the ship, it looks like the skull of an immense beast who might have walked abroad during the earth's infancy. I clambered up its massy chain. Moss grew in the links' hollows, which made climbing treacherous; several times I nearly slipped and fell.

Having reached the hawse hole, I hauled myself on board, and looked about. It seemed salvagers or the elements have stripped the deck of most of its trappings. All that remained were several large metal containers, for the stowage of freight, scattered haphazard about the aft-deck, and a cabin of riveted steel plates amidships. Bolts, bleeding rust, jutted from the deck where other fittings had been wrenched loose. I went to each of the containers in turn and discovered their doors had been forced, and they were empty, bar spiders' webs in the corners, and, underfoot, the muddled bones of small birds and mammals that, seen but dimly in the halfflight, looked like the fragile ploughs, harrows, scythes, and flails used by fairy folk in tilling, reaping, and threshing.<sup>4</sup>

Then I crossed over to the hut. It has windows to the fore and aft, which before I cleaned them were salt-rimed, grimy. I tried the door, found it unlocked, went inside. Shards of broken glass I have subsequently swept up, littered the floor, and I picked my way with caution, lest I cut my feet through my boots' worn soles. Switching on my torch, and scouring the place with its beam, I saw: banks of instruments, the faces of whose dials had been shattered; a number of levers and switches, many of which had been broken, or wrenched from the panel in which they were set – the helm controls, I presumed; strewn in one corner of the wheelhouse, fragments of maps and charts printed upon plastic – evidently they had been ripped down from the walls and torn to shreds; in another corner, a metal desk and chair that had been overturned. It appeared a pent fury had been vented on the appointments.

Going back out on deck, I explored the foredeck. It was featureless, save for a hatch, by which I surmised the companionway could be accessed, and a winch. I examined the former closely. Its seal was crusted with filth. I tried in vain to raise it. In the centre there was a

keypad, doubtless the interface for a combination lock, its buttons marked with strange sigils. I pressed a few at random, but to no avail. Thinking it unlikely the ancient mechanism still functioned, I abandoned these trials. I was not too irked, however: the wheelhouse seemed an ideal place to hide, and I thought the air below decks likely to prove fetid and unwholesome.

I turned my attention to the winch. Seizing the handle on an idle whim, I turned the drum and discovered that it raised and lowered the ship's gangplank. I paid out all the cable; the gangplank's far end struck the estuary mud with a soft plash.

Then I set about cleaning the cabin and making it habitable.

I have seen the sun set and rise ten times while writing the foregoing account. It has taken me longer than I anticipated – early in the day following that of my wounding, the portended storm finally broke; its vehemence confined the young woman and me to the cabin for two days. A welter of thunderheads choked the sky, the wind raged, the rain welted down. The waters of the estuary were roiled and threshed. Buffeted, the wheelhouse shuddered violently, and I feared it might collapse. Fortunately, we had laid in sufficient provisions, but, still, it was a fretful time.

At noon on the third day the tempest finally abated. I went out onto the deck to survey the ruin. The Thames was turbid and swollen with green wood – stout fallen branches, even trees felled entire – and bloated carrion – rats, swine, wild dogs. Once, amid the flotsam, I even saw the body of a young girl; she floated past, so close I could see her face – she stared at the heavens with a sullen look, in mute accusation.

It has remained calm since then. A light drizzle has persisted, however, and, so I might have somewhere to work while the girl sleeps, I spent the best part of a day constructing a shelter of timber and rushes abutting the cabin.

Now I feel it is time to describe the turbulent events of the afternoon on which my forehead was laid open. After lunch that day I left the Ark to go hunting. I spent about two

hours stalking a herd of the reddish, hairy swine common in these parts, but, tired, I was not quick enough, and a kill eluded me. Returning to the boat, exhausted by the chase, filthy, and dishevelled, I heard a terrified scream and broke into a run. I flew through a brake of tall bulrushes, their brittle stems slashing at my face, reached the edge of the flats, and saw the girl standing in the Ark's stern, hurling branches I had collected for firewood at a group of natives – a hostile party from her erstwhile tribe. Clad in loose-fitting garments, armed with slings, cudgels, and swords of chiselled steel that, catching the sun, blazed, they stood at the foot of the transom, shielded from the girl's missiles by a sheet of buckled metal that protruded from the ooze – part of a blade of the ship's enormous propeller. They launched stones at her with their slings, but she was far above, and their shots went awry. Some of the missiles struck the Ark's hull, sounding cracked knells. In the pauses between the girl's volleys, when she scrabbled on the deck at her feet for sticks of the right heft and shape, a burly man ran up from behind the propeller and, throwing up a rope with a grapnel tied to one end, attempted to hook the bulwarks. Sighting this, I realised the girl had had the foresight to raise the gangway at the clansmen's approach. Clearly they considered a scramble up the anchor chain too dangerous – indeed, had I been mortal, I would never have attempted it.

Brandishing my flimsy spear, I charged. Several slingstones were loosed at me as I ran; one struck my chest, cracking a rib. I howled with pain, but did not slow, and as I drew close the tribespeople scattered. Then, on seeing the pitiful weapon with which I was armed, they crowded in, and set upon me. I attempted to defend myself, but a blow shattered the haft of my improvised pike, and I was clubbed to the ground. Then my assailants stood back a few paces. Lying in the mud, too weak to stand, I felt about in the silt and managed to recover the knife that had formed the head of the lance, still lashed to a short section of splintered pole. One of the tribeswomen approached me, sword raised above her head. She had hard lines etched into her face. Her air of authority, and the cotton shift, dyed a rich purple, she wore (the others were dressed in plain linen robes), led me to reason she was probably the leader of

the small band. She hacked at me, and her blade struck my brow. There was great strength behind the blow, and though the sword's edge was dull, I felt it bite bone. High above the girl wailed, her shriek echoed by the cry of a seagull that circled overhead, perhaps the same bird I had seen that morning. The leader lifted her face to the heavens and crowed. Stabbing upwards with my carver, I slashed her belly open. Her viscid entrails slithered forth, slathered me with gore. Wide-eyed, mouth hanging open, she dropped slowly to her haunches, then keeled forwards, lifeless.

I bared my teeth, snarled, spat, and writhed on the ground. The natives ran screaming. I crawled to the water's edge, then fainted.

When I came to, I dragged myself into the river, washed as well as I could. Getting unsteadily to my feet, I tottered back to the Ark. I called for the girl. A moment later she came, snivelling and wary, to the railing overhead, and, sighting me there, cried out in shock and relief. She lowered the gangplank. I boarded the ship. Running up to me, she wrapped me in her arms, but backed off, horrified, on seeing the extent of my injuries. Smiling wanly, she took me by the hand, led me to the bed in the wheelhouse, gestured for me to lie down. I did so and slept for several hours.

Upon waking, I discovered the woman had boiled up rags for me to use as bandages and left them on the deck next to my skillet, which she had filled with clean water. She was swimming in the river, a little way out from the shore; as I watched, she pulled herself up onto a sandbank. She was naked; embarrassed, I averted my gaze. Noticing the typewriter had been used while I slumbered – a sheaf of paper, held in its carriage, fluttered in the breeze – I crossed over, realised the girl had been working on my drafts of William's tale, had typed up my scrawled amendments. I have puzzled over this. All I can think is that she has some inherited memory of the English language – that presumably spoken by her forebears – and when she saw my papers, the buried tongue rose again. However, I have tried communicating with her, both verbally, and in writing, and it is clear she comprehends nothing, is able only to

copy the characters she sees before her: presumably the inborn knowledge of the tongue, watered with each successive generation, is weak in her. After I had finished looking over the faithfully transcribed sections, I sat down to tend to my wounds.

The tribespeople have not returned in the time it has taken me to produce the narratives of my journey and the afternoon of the attack, possibly deterred by the inclement weather. I am thankful for this – I am still very weak and would have had difficulty fending them off. I have done little apart from work on my manuscript, though on the morning of the second day after the storm had blown itself out I scented a foul stench. The corpse of the tribeswoman I had killed, fly-blown, putrid, had begun to reek. The girl and I constructed a bier from driftwood, and sent the body floating down the Thames, out to sea. After we had conducted the mute obsequies, I saw, lying on the mud, the grappling iron and its length of rope, left behind by the tribe in their flight. I picked it up and took it back on board the Ark, in case it should prove useful.

Today I corrected the drafts of everything I have written since completing William's tale. The young woman has typed up the changes. I am glad to have discovered this aptitude of hers; she shall act as my amanuensis, which will make my task much easier. The work seems to please her, too; she hands me the finished pages with a proud and satisfied expression.

This morning there was another shower, but afterwards the wrack broke up, and, for the first time in days, the sun shone. It is now night. Occasionally from overhead I hear a strangled screech; the gull has once more returned; looking up, from time to time, I glimpse it as a bird-shaped void wheeling in the star-spattered sky. I feel I should press on with my account of the evening of tale-telling in the Nightingale – I have neglected that strand of my story for too long.

## VI

After revealing the horrific ending of his tale, William broke down, and shoulders hunched, head in hands, began to weep. The rest of us, harrowed and stupefied, sat gawping, while he weathered the violent storm of his grief.

Tears spent, he lifted his head and looked round the table. He struggled to light a cigarette, with shaking hands. Once he had it smouldering, he drew impulsively, wincing as the smoke drifted into his eyes. A fit of coughing wracked him, and he grimaced.

‘I’d never even touched a cigarette before that night. Now I can’t do without them.’

Duncan mumbled condolences into his beard.

Jane reached out and put her hand on William’s shoulder.

‘I’m so sorry. It must have been...’

She trailed off and, frowning, shrugged her shoulders.

Elliot, who was refilling his pipe, glanced up from the task.

‘That’s dreadful William,’ he said, gently. ‘I’m sorry you had to go through that.’

‘Aye, it’s right awful what happened to you,’ Duncan concurred, his awkwardness overcome.

William turned to me.

‘Sorry about before. It was nervous, not mocking laughter.’

‘I know that now,’ I replied. ‘Sorry I was so defensive.’

William smiled wanly, nodded. Then, with a sudden savagery, he stubbed out his cigarette.

‘I really loved her.’

He took out a handkerchief to dab his eyes.

Duncan offered to buy another round. Only Jane, still nursing her second gin and tonic, declined. William in hollow frolic, suggested we get a drink for the empty chair, drolly claiming the sixth person I had invited to the gathering had, in truth, turned up and was sat in it, but, because they had been rendered invisible, mute, and incorporeal by sorcery, were unable to attract our attention. There was a smattering of polite chuckling from all but Claire, who narrowed her eyes and seemed about to say something, only choking it when Jane glared sharply at her. I went up to the bar with Duncan to help him carry glasses. It seemed the Glaswegian was, perhaps due to his thick accent, misheard, for after our drinks had been lined up on the bar I noticed an extra lager. Given William's jest, it was creepy. I drew the publican's attention to it. He apologised and said, as it would go to waste otherwise, we might as well have it, no charge.

After taking his change, Duncan deftly picked up three pint glasses. I am ashamed to own I looked at him, stunned. Seeing this, he grinned.

'Takes a bit of practice, but it's not really that tricky. I won't be useless.'

I stammered an apology.

'No worries. I know you meant no harm. I manage well enough.'

He flinched.

'What is it?' I asked.

'Ah, it's nothing. A twinge. The arm I lost.'

I looked musingly at him. Divining what I had been on the brink of asking, he nodded.

'You'll learn what happened, soon enough.'

He went back to our table. Scooping up the remaining glasses with both hands, I followed him over.

Duncan and I distributed the drinks. I set the spare pint down before the unoccupied seat. William frowned at me, and I explained about the landlord's mistake. William paled.

'Uncanny coincidence.'

‘These things happen,’ I responded, trying to make light of the incident.

‘They do,’ he said, meaningfully.

In an effort to dispel the disquiet that had taken hold, I attempted a witticism.

‘I’m not sure our insubstantial comrade would have chosen lager, but tough, boggarts can’t be choosers.’

There were groans, not laughs, but in my aim I was successful: the mood was less fraught.

Claire then asked William whether there been an investigation into his girlfriend’s death, and, if so, how he had evaded blame and prison.

‘Well, there was no death,’ William replied. ‘At least, not until later.’

He described how he had returned to his flat, leaving the decapitated corpse on the Heath, to discover Catherine waiting up, worried. While he struggled to master the shock of seeing her alive, she stared in consternation at the gore on his shirt. He had been beaten up by a gang of youths on his way home, he lied. He had not been badly hurt, the blood was not his – he had hit one of the thugs in the face with a wildly flailing elbow, started a nosebleed.

Over the next few months, havoc loosed in his brain, William grew morose. During this period, Catherine also seemed sunk in despondency. At first they bickered a lot, then finally, aside from curt exchanges about bills and other mundanities, they ceased speaking altogether.

One night, Catherine, hoping to cheer them both and to mend some of the hurt, suggested they go out for a meal. At first things went well – their conversation was pleasant, if inconsequential. It was not until they had finished their starters and were waiting for the next course, that Catherine, beginning to feel the effects of the red wine they were drinking, told William how his recent callousness rankled. He was defensive, angered.

‘You’ve been pretty cold yourself.’

‘Since you were attacked, you’ve been different,’ she said, gently.

‘Not really.’



‘Yes. Have you told me everything that happened that night?’

‘Of course I have.’

He spat the words out like fish bones.

‘Don’t you love me anymore?’

‘I do, I’m sorry. But you’ve not been yourself, either.’

Claire squinted, smiled melancholic.

At that moment their waiter came over. He apologised. There was a problem in the kitchen. Service would be slow. Would they like another bottle of wine, no charge? Yes, they said. That would be fine, they were happy to wait.

Their talk turned maudlin then, the wine, probably – they soon finished the first bottle and began on the second. Despite this William felt his black mood lifting slightly, his affection for Catherine rekindled by shared woes. He held her hand over the table. Then, after they had been chatting for a little while, leaning forward, she said:

‘Will, there’s something I’ve never told you. I thought you’d find it strange. I don’t think we should keep things from each other anymore, though.’

‘What is it?’

Like a sibyl consulting a caged sylph, Catherine stared up at the dim bulb glowing in the old-fashioned storm-lantern that hung low over the table.

‘When I was growing up, I had an imaginary friend. I called her Jessie. Sometimes she was little more than a hazy outline, but at others I could see her clearly. She had longer hair, paler skin, but otherwise she looked just like me.’

She broke off and looked up. William’s countenance was blank, but he fiddled with his napkin.

‘Later,’ she continued, ‘I learnt from my parents that I had been one of twins, but that my sister had been stillborn. This frightened me at first.’

She nibbled a crescent paring from a fingernail.

‘I no longer saw Jessie by then, but I often had the feeling she was there with me, watching over me.’

Pausing, she smiled to herself.

‘That never left me, at least not till recently. Now I think she’s abandoned me. For a while I’ve felt alone.’

She shook her head as if to clear it, rolled her eyes.

‘You must think I’m crazy. And it is silly. But that’s why I’ve been preoccupied... a bit down these last weeks.’

Pale and wan, face drawn, William stared at her without speaking.

‘So,’ Catherine said. ‘What’s upset you? Why’ve you not been yourself?’

She looked at William expectantly. At that moment the waiter brought their plates, set them down. She began eating, but he sat still.

She looked at him pensively.

‘If you won’t tell me what’s wrong, at least eat.’

‘Did you ever misplace that ring I gave you?’

‘What?’

William pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes.

‘Did you ever leave it anywhere, anything like that?’

‘I left it at my parents’ house once. My mum found it and sent it to me, remember?’

‘No.’

He slumped back in his chair. The soft lighting in the restaurant, and the low, happy murmuring of the couples dining there, now seemed sinister gloom and muttering. A dark paranoia fell upon him like a shroud. Catherine’s hand trembled; he felt this confirmation of his bleak suspicions.

‘What did you do?’ Jane was eager to know.

William looked round at those of us gathered in the Nightingale. Fresh tears beaded his lashes.

‘Without a word I got up from the table. I accidentally knocked my plate to the floor as I did so. It smashed. A pool of gravy spread, slow and heavy as blood, flowing along the grouting between the tiles. I left the restaurant and began walking in a direction chosen on a whim. I hadn’t gone far when I heard Catherine call my name and turned. She was chasing after me. She ran out into the road, without looking.’

Trembling, William reached out, took up his drink, and downed half of it at one draught.

‘There was a bus. The driver braked, but couldn’t stop in time. She died instantly.’

Jane’s response was heartfelt.

‘Oh God. I’m so sorry.’

William stared at her vacantly. As though reliving the events of that night.

‘Son, are you alright?’ Duncan prompted.

William blanched, came out of his trance.

‘This is the first time I’ve ever told anyone about...’

He trailed off, looked down at his drink. Then, after a few moments, he raised his eyes again.

‘After the funeral I spent months holed up in my flat, avoiding people, going out as little as possible. In the last year I have returned to work, started socialising, but it’s been hard.’

Claire, who had been distractedly stirring her vodka and lemonade with a straw, took a sip, then asked William what he thought had really happened to him that night on the Heath.

‘I don’t know. I try not to think about it. I also can’t talk about it anymore. Perhaps someone else should tell their tale?’

A brief exchange ensued, the result of which was that Jane volunteered to relate her story, but said she had to go to the toilet first. She got to her feet and left the table. I looked round the pub. Though it was still early, the Nightingale had already begun to empty out; it was a

week night after all. However, a large group still caroused in a corner at the opposite side of the saloon; from the cards and scraps of wrapping paper strewn over their table, I presumed it to be a birthday celebration. The other remaining patrons sat in pairs and threes, conversing quietly.

While we were awaiting Jane's return, I told William of the tattoos of swords I had seen that evening. The one inked onto the businessman's wrist he had, of course, remarked himself. He said that in the preceding months he had noticed a number of identical markings, something that caused him great consternation; it reminded him of his ordeal, filled him with fear he might be recognized by one of the strange fellowship and again enmeshed in some occult horror.

I have already described how the Nightingale was divided by a wooden partition into two regions – a public bar, and a secluded saloon at the rear where we sat – and how this screen had etched glass panes set into it. However, I neglected to mention that many of these panes, though chased around their margins, were clear in the centre. Through one of these I had a view – a little warped, distorted – of the entrance. As we were talking I saw a man come into the pub. He stood on the threshold for a brief instant, then staggered a few paces across the carpet, leaving the door ajar behind him. Through the narrow gap I could see the night had grown even more bleak and inimical. A swirl of sleet blew in, settled on the carpet (today it is blustery, the wind stirs the waters of the sombre estuary, and spindrift clings to the spears of coarse salt grass growing in the dunes on the far side of the mudflats; each droplet is limned by the sun's rays – the sleet on the carpet in the Nightingale glistened just like that). The man's antic appearance and manner caught my attention: I scrutinised him. He wore an ill-fitting, rumpled, pinstriped suit, a dishevelled, unconvincing wig, and had the sunken, dulled eyes, raw cheeks, and reddish, puffy nose of a heavy drinker. He hopped from foot to foot, wringing his hands.

None of the others in my group could see this bizarre individual, as they all either had their backs to him, or their views of him obscured by the partition or chimney breast. The patrons nearest the crazed drunk feigned unconcern, though some glared in annoyance at the open door. He looked about him, as if seeking someone out. Then, catching sight of our gathering, or rather Duncan's hunched shoulders and back, he began cackling silently to himself. Grinning inanely, he stumbled, then fell against a table, upsetting someone's pint. I watched as the landlord came out from behind the counter. After hauling the misfit to his feet, the pub owner began remonstrating with him. The drunk said something, which, though too quiet for me to catch, was presumably offensive, for the landlord, hitherto calm, seemed suddenly incensed. There was a scuffle, then the toper was thrown out. Before the door shut on him he bawled, in a cracked reedy voice, 'You fucks! You're cursed to a living hell!' It was not clear whom he was addressing, but for some reason I felt his outburst was directed at my companions and me.

The others looked up.

'What was that? What did that mean?' Duncan enquired, clearly rattled.

'Just some drunkard,' I replied, keeping my unfounded apprehension to myself. 'The landlord threw him out.'

The Scotsman knitted his brows, looked as if he were about to speak again, but at that moment Jane returned.

'See that lunatic?' she enquired.

Elliot nodded. 'Lots of them about, it's bedlam on the streets,' he said, then winked enigmatically.

Jane sat down, and took a sip of her drink.

'Shall I begin?'

'Yes,' I replied. 'Go ahead.'

'Alright. Have any of you been through the foot tunnel under the Thames at Woolwich?'

We all shook our heads, though I explained I had crossed under the river at Greenwich, where there was another pedestrian subway.

‘Yes. They were built at the same time to similar designs, but, while the Greenwich subway has been kept up, the one at Woolwich has fallen into disrepair. I used to use it fairly often. One hot summer’s day, about four and a half years ago, I’d taken my two boys to have a picnic and play in the fountains in Barrier Park. As a treat I decided to take them back by way of the tunnel, they liked to pretend it was the secret passage to a superhero’s hideout...’

Jane paused a moment and, grimacing, rubbed her forehead with the back of her hand.

‘But first I must tell you of a terrible thing that happened a few years before then, for it bears on what I wish to relate...’

### **One Moment Knelled the Woe of Years<sup>1</sup>**

Jane's prologue was dreadful and distressing. She related the events of an evening four years before the fateful afternoon whose horrors she wished to share with us. That night her husband Roderick had come home later than was usual, long after she had put their children to bed. She had not been concerned about his tardiness; Roderick was a university lecturer, a Victorian poetry specialist, and was sometimes held up at work by unscheduled meetings, panicked students, and so on. But when she saw him coming in through the front door she had a vague presentiment of ill, for he was naturally dark skinned and by temperament calm, and that evening his complexion was wan and his features had a frantic cast. When she asked how he was, though, he said all was well.

During dinner he was quieter than was his wont and ate without relish, but other than that seemed fine. But, when Jane went into the living room after putting the crockery, cutlery, and pans in the dishwasher, she found him sitting in an armchair, rocking back and forth, his eyes glazed, mumbling to himself. Filled with horror, she had run to him, and, going down on her hunkers beside the chair, thrown her arms around him. For a moment he sat there without stirring, braced, then, of a sudden, glared at Jane with bitter hatred, knocked her to the floor, got to his feet, and stalked out of the room. He returned, brandishing a large kitchen knife, before she had got back on her feet, and lunged at her, raving and snarling obscenities. Jane just had time to seize hold of a heavy, iron poker hanging on a stand in the grate, then he was upon her.

Peril strengthens the sinews and quickens the brain, and, despite Roderick's greater muscle, Jane was able to fend him off and escape the corner he had penned her into. She fled up the stairs, her first thought being to protect her sons. Roderick followed hard on her

heels. At the top of the flight she turned and lashed out blind and wild with the poker. The blow caught Roderick on the temple, dazed him; he lost his footing and tumbled down the steps. At the foot of the staircase he pitched forward and, landing awkwardly, fell upon the knife, driving it into his chest. He grunted, rolled onto his back. The knife was buried to the haft. Blood welled forth, ran sluggish along the grouted furrows between the floor tiles. Roderick wallowed, then lay still, weltering in his gore. Jane screamed, dropped the poker, put her hand to her mouth.

She then heard the door of the children's bedroom opening behind her. Turning, she saw her eldest son, Peter, then aged six, standing in the doorway.

‘Mummy, what’s going on?’

Providentially, Jane stood at the top of the steps, and he could not see past her.

‘Peter, go back into your room, shut the door, and don’t come out till I tell you.’

‘Why?’

‘I’ll tell you later.’

The child, frightened by his mother’s palpable horror, obeyed.

Turning, Jane began descending the stairs, shaking, tears running down her cheeks. When she was about halfway down, Roderick stirred. Halting, she looked on aghast as, groaning, he sat up, raised himself so he crouched on his haunches, then stood up. Once on his feet, he leaned against the wall, blinking. His shirtfront was soaked with blood. Staring blankly up at her, he gripped the handle of the knife in both hands, drew it slowly from his body, and flung it from him. It struck the living-room door point first and stuck in the wood. The blade shivered. Roderick turned and ran out the front door.

Jane sank down on the stairs, buried her head in her hands, fell into a trance fit. She was roused from it a while later when two policemen entered through the front door, which was standing open. They informed her they had been called out to an incident – a man, bleeding heavily from a wound to his chest, had frightened some drinkers outside a pub on the banks of



the Thames, then thrown himself into the river.<sup>2</sup> Witnesses stated the body had been swept away by the current. It was high tide, they doubted it would be found, they said. A trail of gore led them to Jane's house. They wanted to know what had happened. She, weeping, told them.

After concluding her account, she heard the sound of muffled sobbing coming from overhead. She felt a sickening lurch, flew up to her children. As soon as she opened their bedroom door, they flung themselves at her.

'Mummy, mummy, what's happened?' Jeremy asked, tearful.

Kneeling down, Jane hugged her sons to her. The policemen, following her up the stairs, stopped, hung their heads, and looked down at the glossy, patent-leather uppers of their shoes. Jane wrung her brains for a way to dull the blow. Then Peter said, in a sad voice, 'Has Daddy gone?'

Jane began to weep.

'Yes, Peter, I'm afraid he has.'

'Who is she?'

Jane was thrown into confusion.

'Who?'

'The other woman.'

Peter looked at her as if she were being obtuse.

Then Jane understood. The father of one of her sons' school friends had recently run off with the nanny. Jane seized on this with relief – the ordinary sorrow of a broken home would be easier on her sons for the time being. When they were older they would be better able to cope with the truth. She began to spin her lie, then remembering the police officers, turned, caught one of their eyes – he frowned, but nodded in tacit agreement.

Though Jane came close, a number of times, to revealing to her sons what had really happened, she never did. As with all swaddling lies, it became harder, not easier, to expose as

the years passed. At first the boys, Peter in particular, asked often whether they might be allowed to see their father. Jane told them he had moved abroad, an untruth she maintained until they eventually ceased asking her about him. She was not at all convinced they really believed this, and feared her eldest, though he never said or did anything to finally confirm her suspicions, bore resentment towards her. He seemed a little diffident of her. Thus her lie became a constant source of gnawing guilt which soured the relationship between Jane and her sons.

Jane's life was blighted, a pall cast over it, her brain cankered with horror. Terrible dark dreams stalked her nights. Though the raw trauma finally passed, these did not abate. Thus, when she woke on the morning of the day her tale concerned, it was from a nightmare in which she relived every wracking instant of the evening of Roderick's frenzy and suicide. At first she was unsure where she was and sat up in bed sweating, trying to recollect herself.

It was the first day of the summer holidays. She had resolved to devote the next weeks to her children, Peter, then ten, and Jeremy, eight, whom she was concerned she had not spent enough time with during the previous months. She had just finished, the afternoon before, a draft of a novel of long and wearying gestation. She considered it to be the best work she had ever done; it was the first time she had written with primarily aesthetic, not pecuniary motives. She had been able to do so as, about a year after Roderick's death, one of her books had been optioned for a film and she had received a large sum. Freed from monetary strictures, she had abandoned the shallow seam of fool's gold – trite, romantic, historical fiction – she had been mining and lucratively passing off as the real thing all her career, to plumb the depths in search of rarer ores. She threw herself into this work in an effort to take her mind off the tragedy of her husband's terrible end.

The book, in common with her other titles, was set in the past, but – stylistically experimental and, at times, fantastical in its treatment of the historical source material –

otherwise represented a departure. It was a fictionalised account of the life of Wenceslaus, a tenth-century Bohemian martyr.

It was the novel's final chapter that Jane was most proud of – a scene inspired by an ancient legend that tells of an enchanted cave beneath the rugged slopes of Blaník Mountain in which Wenceslaus, in the company of many knights, slumbers, ready to sally forth to the defence of the Czech motherland, should it be beset by enemies. In this epilogue, after being awakened from his millennial sleep by the tumult of the German advance in 1939, Wenceslaus rouses his page and, accompanied by the young lad, climbs to Blaník's summit to survey the hostile forces. The page, pointing out the tanks, asks, 'What nature of beasts are those, Sire?'

Wenceslaus lifts his visor and gazes at the war machines a while before responding, wearily:

'Those, my son, are the dragons of yore. I reckoned the last of them slain, but it cannot be so. Plainly they lived on in the wild places of the earth. It seems some blackheart has happened on a brood in some darksome delve and dug them up. If so, reared from hatchlings they will be fiercely loyal. They are devilish foe even without armour and these, look, are accoutred in barding of steel plate. We cannot ride 'gainst them, 'twould go badly for us, 'twould be a slaughter. I rede we leave the knights to their slumbers and wash our hands of these wicked times.'

But the page, ashamed of his master's cowardice, leaps astride the saint's horse and charges upon the enemy troops. In the novel's melancholy final lines he is cut down by German machine gun fire, and Wenceslaus, who has watched his futile death, saddened, re-enters the cavern and intones the formula that once more seals the enchanted portal.

Jane had given this novel the tentative title, *His Master's Steps*.<sup>3</sup>

(I had read one of Jane's novels some years before, and, while it was definitely populist fare, I found it contained moments of genuine humanity. When she retired, the reason cited in

the press was the pressure of combining a writing career with raising two children. I felt we were about to learn the real explanation. *His Master's Steps* had never, as far as I knew, been published. I asked her if this was the case.

‘Yes,’ she replied, regretfully. ‘The publishers didn’t want to take it, and after what happened, I hadn’t the heart to pursue it.’)

Jane got up, took a shower. She wondered how to spend the day ahead. She had lots of trips and activities planned to keep the boys entertained during the holidays. Tired (finishing the novel had fatigued her) she thought she would take advantage of the good weather and have a relaxing day without going too far afield. A picnic in Barrier Park seemed ideal. She went downstairs and proposed the idea to the boys, who had been up for a while, watching cartoons on television.

‘Sounds nice,’ said Peter, briefly turning his gaze from the antics of an anthropomorphic sea urchin. ‘Glad you’ve some free time.’

It was not said in a tone of reproach, still Jane felt a smart of remorse, resolved to spend as much time as possible with her sons over the coming weeks.

Barrier Park was a public garden in Silvertown on the north bank of the river, by the Thames Barrier. It had only been inaugurated about a year and a half before the events of Jane’s tale took place; its landscaping demonstrated the strange mix of the playful and austere of the municipal style of the period.

Jane, Peter, and Jeremy ate their picnic sitting on the grass by the riverbank, watching yachts and tugs sail past. Peter thought the Barrier looked like ‘a crash-landed spaceship’, and Jane made up a story about the alien pilot of this craft, who, having freed himself from its wreckage, swam to shore and wandered through London recording his impressions of the city. The boys laughed at the idea he thought St Paul’s Cathedral housed a huge boiled egg, and that the tourists queuing up outside were awaiting their turn to dunk a toast soldier or two.

After lunch they went to the coffee shop at the entrance, and Peter and Jeremy changed into their swimming costumes in the toilets. Then they went down to the park's open fountain, a square with a number of vents, that intermittently gave forth jets of water, set into its flags. Many children splashed and disported. Peter and Jeremy joined them. Jane watched, grinning, soon soaked through by spray.

After a while the boys tired, and the three of them went to sit on greensward and dry off in the sun. Then they went back to the café, Peter and Jeremy got dressed again, and Jane bought them all ice creams, plus a coffee for herself. They went back to the bank, and sat for a while looking out over the water. Motes of sunlight flittered gleeful on the chop; had Jane and her sons been sitting closer to the edge and not been blinded by the dazzle they would, perhaps, have seen the river was, in truth, a filthy gruel.

Soon it was time to head home. At first the boys did not want to leave, but, when Jane promised to take them through the Woolwich Foot Tunnel, they grew eager to be off.

It was only two stops on the Docklands Light Railway from Pontoon Dock, at the park's entrance, to King Elliot V, the end of the line, not far from the north entrance to the foot tunnel. Jane bought three singles from a ticket machine, then, taking her sons' hands, climbed up to the eastbound platform. The track, which ran along a raised viaduct supported by concrete stanchions, resembled the set from a science-fiction film.

(I have seen firsthand that none of the Enlightenment era's presentiments of a dystopic future came to pass, neither did any of its augured idylls; until the collapse of civilisation things remained largely the same. Cultures rose, gained ascendancy, fell into decadence, decayed and were ravaged by pestilence or destroyed by war. Then, from the charnel pits and ruins, new societies arose to begin the cycle once more, pullulating in bonemeal-fecundated and scorched earth just as plants do. Perhaps certain thinkers of the ancient world, who believed that the universe was periodically destroyed by a purging fire, and reborn from ashes to experience the same history, were close to the truth.<sup>4</sup> Upon reflection, perhaps my dismissal

of the philosophy of the Himalayans in the early pages of this manuscript was precipitate, motivated by the fact it is anathema to me – for those whose span is finite the view which holds that history is a recurring cycle offers comfort, a sense of continuity beyond the borders of birth and death, but for an immortal it is intolerable, a vertiginous swarm of events without meaning.<sup>5</sup> However, I must own I can see the truth in it; perhaps, as I have speculated before, the omens of impending cataclysm I have noted are not signs of the end of things, but of their renewal.)

At King George V station Jane, Peter, and Jeremy got off the train and headed towards the river. After a short walk they arrived at the subway's north entrance: a building resembling a mausoleum that housed the staircase and lift by which the foot tunnel was accessed.

Jane and her sons went inside, called the lift, and waited for it. When the doors opened, they stepped into the wood-panelled interior, the attendant pushed a button, and a rattling descent began. The attendant did not look up, gazed at a picture of a scantily-clad model in his tabloid. Jane, to avert her sons' eyes from the photograph, offered them a sweet from a packet she took out of her handbag.

The attendant was a vaguely threatening presence, and Jane was glad when the lift doors opened. She and the boys stepped through. The only sources of illumination in the foot tunnel were the fluorescent tubes fixed to the ceiling at intervals; they gave out a harsh, grainy light, to which it took Jane's eyes a moment to adjust. She found the subway exerted a powerful fascination, and it was always with fresh wonder that she cast her gaze about. Though roughly circular in cross-section, the tunnel was flattened underfoot to provide a level surface to walk upon; this floor was laid with tattered linoleum, and covered in a thin film of water and filth, in which the muddled footprints of those who had recently passed that way were clearly visible; otherwise the boring was tiled in white ceramic, as the walls in abattoirs, hospitals, asylums, and other such places are. As the course of the tunnel described an arc as it dipped to

pass under the river, it sloped down to its midpoint; this gave rise to a disorientating sensation, for the incline was imperceptible to the eye, deprived of all reference, but sensible to the organs of balance. Another disconcerting consequence of this was that it was impossible to see either end in the middle section of the underpass.

The boys ambled on ahead and Jane followed at their heels, from time to time swooping down on them to give them a scare. As was not unusual on weekday afternoons, the tunnel was almost deserted. There had been another person a little ahead, whistling a melancholy air, but, striding away, he or she dwindled and was soon swallowed up by the tunnel's maw. After they had been dawdling along for a few minutes, they turned to notice that the lift behind them could no longer be seen. While in that section of the subway, Jane often felt anxious it would prove interminable, but in endeavouring to conceal this fear from her sons, she managed then to suppress it entirely. She told her sons a story about a monster, something like a giant crab, with huge claws, brittle, spindly legs, and a mouth crammed with vicious, pointed teeth, that sometimes scuttled back and forth in the tunnel seeking 'naughty boys' to devour; Peter and Jeremy were too old to be truly frightened, but enjoyed the thrill of horror.

Then Jeremy cried out in real terror, and, wan and trembling, pointed out a dull-red mark on the passage wall.

'Mum, what's that?'

Jane bent down to examine the discolouration. After a moment she straightened up.

'It's a patch of rust. Come on, let's get going, otherwise we won't be home in time for tea.'

Jane and Peter went on down the underpass, but Jeremy remained a moment, staring wide-eyed at the stain. Gore welled up from grouting between the tiles and ran down the wall; the child began screaming.<sup>6</sup> Without turning round Jane called out to her youngest, irritated.

'Come on Jeremy, stop being silly.'

He ran to catch his mother and brother up.

‘Mum!’ he wailed, clutching at Jane.

Jane could feel her hard won composure crumbling, and, pushing his hand away, scolded him.

‘Stop this nonsense!’

The boy’s shoulders began rising and falling jerkily; he was desperately trying to hold back tears.

Jane softened, knelt down beside her son.

‘I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to get angry. But I promise that the mark you saw was just rust. Nothing to be scared of.’

She got to her feet and took hold of her sons’ hands; the three of them pressed on.

They had gone on like that, hand in hand, for a little while, when it occurred to Jane they had been walking for longer than it should have taken to reach the other end of the tunnel. Though she tried to convince herself this was just foolishness, a terrible foreboding swelled within her, and she broke into a stride, almost dragging the boys along. But the far end of the tunnel still did not come into view. She stopped, breathless and wracked by tremors.

‘Are you alright?’ Peter asked.

Fighting to control her nerves, she replied, in as comforting a voice as she could muster:

‘Yes, I’m fine. Just worried it’s getting late.’

Clearly, she thought, she was deluded about how far they had come. Still, she could not force herself to go on; hobbled by fear, her legs would not do as she willed. They would have to return to the lift they had descended in. She told her sons this, but pretended it was because she had decided it would be fun to go back and take the ferry across the river. Excited at the prospect of a boat trip, Peter and Jeremy were happy to turn around. The three of them began heading back the way they had come.

Jane managed to regain her composure and was calm for a time, but, realising they had not again come upon the distinctive rust stain passed earlier, she was once more filled with



dread. Feeling the need to hasten, she suggested a race to her sons. Shrieking excitedly, they dashed ahead. She ran to catch up.

The three of them had been careering along for what seemed to Jane an age, without sight of the lift doors, when her mettle failed her, and she stopped, leaned against the wall, and slumped down. Shrouding her face with her hands, she began to weep. The boys, soon realising she was no longer running behind them, went back to see what was the matter. Jeremy, confused and shaken on seeing his mother so feeble, asked what was wrong.

She choked her sobs, parted her fingers, gazed up at him blearily. Peter crossed over, also looked down at her, concerned. The boys reached down to help their mother to her feet.

Then a cry rolled upon this touching scene from somewhere up ahead – faint, but distinct, it was Roderick calling out to his sons, calling them to him.

The boys turned, stared off down the tunnel. Jane stood up. Jeremy grabbed for her hand, but she pulled it away from him.

‘That voice,’ he said, musingly. ‘I remember it.’

Jane tottered a few steps, gaping, peering into the distance.

The hail came once more.

‘Who is that?’ Jeremy demanded.

Peter answered him.

‘It’s dad.’

Jeremy looked up at Jane, wide-eyed.

‘Can we go to him?’

‘No!’

Peter and Jeremy flinched.

She twisted her lips into a wan smile, said, in a softer tone, ‘It must be coincidence. Someone calling for another Peter and Jeremy.’

Terror clawed and scrabbled at her chest.

‘Rubbish,’ Peter retorted. ‘It’s him.’

‘No Peter, it can’t be.’

‘Why not?’

Frantic, too weak, tired, and frightened to sham, Jane blurted the long stifled truth:

‘Because he’s dead.’

Jeremy began crying. Peter looked at her with disdain.

‘He didn’t run off with another woman,’ she went on. ‘He killed himself. So painful, I wanted to keep it from you. But I shouldn’t have, I shouldn’t have cosseted you like that. Its going to go badly for us, I feel it.’

Peter stamped his feet.

‘Liar!’

He made little fists of his hands, flailed at his mother.

‘Why can’t we ever see him? Why punish us? It isn’t fair!’

Jane hugged him to her. He thrashed and wailed. She held him tight.

‘You’re hurting me!’ the boy howled.

She let him go, staggered back a few paces, began crying again.

Jeremy, cowed, cringed, sucked his thumb.

‘Peter, don’t go!’ Jane pleaded. ‘I’m sorry I hurt you. I’m frightened. Something ghastly...’

The call was heard a third time, louder than before.

Peter made as if to strike off down the corridor; Jane reached out and took a firm grip of his upper arm.

‘I hate you!’ he raged.

Jeremy turned, took off. Loosing her grip on Peter, Jane started after her youngest, closed on him, seized his collar. He began wailing. Then Peter darted past them. As Jane made to grab him, Jeremy writhed free. Both boys fled. Jane gave chase, but it was as if her tendons

had been unhooked, and she stumbled and staggered, lost ground to her sons. She implored them to stop, but they only went faster. Due to the upward curving of the boring, as they receded into the distance they were slowly hidden by the ceiling, from their heads to their feet. It was like watching a sluggish python swallow its prey. Finally they disappeared altogether, and the noise of their footfalls grew fainter and fainter, until it could no longer be heard. Silence closed in on her, and, overwhelmed by fatigue, she blacked out.

When she roused, her brain was void. The first thing she recalled was a vision she had had during her faint. She had been wandering murky corridors that smelt of brine and decay, were choked with dross and human carrion. In alcoves machines burbled like simpletons.<sup>7</sup> Then her memory returned to her piecemeal. She shuddered, despaired for her sons.

In the filth smeared over the floor of the foot tunnel, she saw, mingled with the shoeprints, the tracks of hooves, and another strange spoor she could not identify.

Rising awkwardly to her feet, she stood unsteady, head cocked on one side, listening. She heard faint clanking.

The noise grew louder. Then she saw in the distance a shrunk, hunched old man, with a matted, grey beard and a shock of white hair. He was clad in a besmirched and torn robe of some coarse cloth, and shuffled along with the aid of a crutch tipped with an iron ferrule.<sup>8</sup>

Jane approached this stranger, thinking to ask him if he had seen Peter and Jeremy. Once within hailing distance, she called out, but the hoary cripple appeared not to hear her, continued on his way, looking down at the ground. From time to time he fretfully shook his head from side to side. A starling, its breast spangled with white markings, flitted hither and yon above him, occasionally alighting on the crown of his head to pause a moment in rest.

Jane drew near the old man, but as he shambled with his eyes fixed on his feet, it was not until she stood right before him he noticed her. Leaning on his stick, he peered up at her with rimy eyes. He worked his lower jaw from side to side, spoke.

‘What’re you doing in this place?’

The words came out haltingly, as if it had been a while since he had last spoken.

‘I’m looking for my sons. Have you seen two young boys?’

He squinted at her.

‘There’s a kind of symmetry in that. I’m looking for my mother, at least I think I am.’<sup>9</sup>

‘So you haven’t seen my sons?’

The beggar gesticulated wildly with his staff, lost his balance, and fetched up sitting on the floor, breathing ragged.

‘Now hold on,’ he gasped. ‘I never said that, did I?’

Jane apologised, helped him back to his feet.

‘If you know anything at all, please tell me.’

The greybeard pursed his lips. Deep lines scored the leathery skin about them.

‘You might try through there,’ he suggested, gesturing at a service door in the tunnel wall.

Jane looked at it. She had not noticed it before. It was a metal hatch, painted dull green. Thanking the strange old crock, who grinned sly, she turned the handle, swung the door open, and stepped through. Tripping on the threshold, she fell to her knees.

She got back to her feet, peered about her. The sky was overcast, it was gloaming, night was retaking those tracts day had seized and held for but a short time, and she could see little. Then the sun rallied and darted a ray through a break in the clouds, momentarily lighting up the region. She saw she was surrounded by barren heath, somehow above ground again. There was nothing but desolate scrubland to the horizon’s bound – the door and tunnel were gone. She saw sign that a rout had crossed the plain – a great swathe of the wretched couch grass, gorse, and heather had been trampled.

Jane followed this trail for a time. Her eyes grew used to the crepuscular, cloud-blotted light, and, while it lasted, she found she could see fairly well. Then night fell and the world was dark a hairsbreadth in front of her face. She stumbled on a little way, but, hearing the

gurgle of a watercourse near at hand, and anxious to avoid blundering into a stream, stopped, resolved to stay where she was, and bide her time until dawn brought light to see by.

But she did not have to wait for sunrise to proceed for, by and by, the clouds dispersed, and a leering, reddish moon lit up the plain. Jane looked up at the stars. Usually she saw only chaos in the night sky, for she had never learnt to pick out the constellations, but the patterns in that strange welkin seemed to have been chased by an apt, if devilish hand, and strongly conveyed to her a scene of bloody strife – grotesque beasts rending one another with tooth and claw.

Walking on, she soon came to a foul, noisome brook; seen by the unwholesome light of the bloodmoon, it seemed a torrent of gore. Gnarled alders, and forlorn sallow lined its bank. Shuddering, she forded it.

On gaining the other side, she struggled through a briar thicket, thorns tearing at her garments, and found herself on the edge of a shambles where brutal hosts had met and fought. The arena was a bloody slob strewn with the dead and the dying; the reek of the slaughter was stifling.

Near to Jane a gaunt maddened nag stood pawing the ground and rolling its eyes, quivering flanks bespattered with mud and blood.

Trudging on, across that accursed plain, wary of the grasping hands of the wounded and the naked blades and caltrops that littered the ground, Jane hardened herself to its stench, the spilled guts, and the groans. It was quiet else, eerily quiet – the crows squabbling over morsels made no cawing, and it was too cold for blowflies. On the other side of the fell battleground a dark tower loomed, veiled in low mist. Jane was drawn towards this fortress: a lofty spire of obsidian, with many beetling bastions.

There were war engines also on the field: rusty gory machines; travesties of farming implements; harrows and ploughs for raking and furrowing flesh, not the soil; bladed wheels and flails for reaping and threshing men, not crops.

That morning, feeling summery, Jane had put on a pretty pleated skirt, cut from a floral-print material, which, knee-length, left her calves bare. Stumbling, she looked down and saw her shins were flecked with grime. At this, something broke within her – she put her head in her hands and moaned, low.

When she looked about her again, all had changed utterly. She stood in a blasted waste surrounded by sawtooth peaks. The moon overhead was a pitted silver coin, its lustre tarnished. Underfoot was coarse grey sand. The horrors of the battlefield were gone, but that barren playa was too a place of death. Here and there were planks nailed cruciform and planted in the earth to mark graves; packmules carcasses, their leathery hides partially flayed the wind, ribs poking through like the timbers of wrecked coracles, were strewn about; and close by was a file of abandoned covered wagons, canted, warped, and sunbleached. A dust-devil, a frenzied moil of dirt, meandered across the ground a little distance from Jane, then subsided with a near human sigh. The buckle of her belt waxed phosphorescent, as if some haunt had been called forth from the metal.

A little way ahead of her, where the dark tower had stood, was a squat round limestone turret.<sup>10</sup> The merlons of its parapet had been eroded to stumps. There was a door at ground level, but no windows, or loopholes in sight.

Jane made for this building. As she walked, her footfalls raised ashen familiars that scampered in her wake.

She soon reached the tower, crossed to the door. It was solid oak and reinforced by iron battens. Affixed to it was a brass knocker in the form of a crocodile's head with a ring hanging from its jaws. Jane tried the handle, but the door was shut fast. She knocked. A dull thud, then all was quiet. She hammered on the door repeatedly with her fists, screaming her sons' names, begging them to come to her.

(At this point in Jane's tale, I interrupted her narrative to ask why she was so certain Jeremy and Peter were inside the tower.

‘I just knew,’ she replied. ‘A mother knows.’)

Silence answered Jane’s entreaties.

She walked around the tower seeking another way in, but there was none – the drab masonry was blank as a natural outcropping of rock, or a smokestack. Finding herself once more at the door, she again thumped on it. This time it swung open under her blows, its hinges wailing.

Entering, she found herself standing in the hall of her own house. Her fear drained away. It was as if she had drunk a draught of nepenthes and all her sorrows had been banished from her mind. Casting her eyes down, she noticed, spread out on the tiles, a rug. What wariness remained to her urged her to heed to a dim recollection of throwing that rug on a fire in the back garden years before. But the strange influence of the place prevailed, convinced her the memory was a figment. The rug had clearly not been burnt to ash; hence, had never been stiff with blood.

Then the sound of chatter coming from behind a door to her right fell upon her ears. Peter and Jeremy larking. Crossing over, her heart light, she opened the door. She looked through, saw her sons sitting at a table draped with a checked cloth, laid with four places. A half-empty bottle of red wine sat on it.

Beyond the table was a doorway, and, framed by it, a man stood, with his back to Jane, stirring something in a pan on a stove. He was wearing an apron. Jane scented frying onions, and heard their sizzle.

Peter smiled.

‘Mum. Come in. Dad’s cooking.’

The man at the oven turned to face her. Roderick.<sup>11</sup> He smiled.

‘Take a seat, have some wine. Dinner won’t be long.’

Sitting down, Jane poured herself a glass from the bottle, sipped it. It was good.

‘What’re we having?’

‘Risotto,’ Peter replied.

‘Delicious.’

She felt very happy.

‘Mum, you look ill,’ Peter said.

‘I feel it. Writing’s been a slog the last few weeks, and I haven’t been sleeping all that well. But don’t worry about me, I’m fine really.’

‘Are you sure you don’t need to go to the doctor?’ Jeremy asked.

‘No. I’ll be right as rain once I’ve had a rest.’

Then she thought she heard a low, plaintive whinny, and had a grim vision of a horse standing alone amid a carrion field. She shuddered, swigged at her wine. Must simply have been the wind whickering in the branches of the birch in the back garden, and a shot recalled from a film watched long ago, forgotten save for that one image.

Roderick put a lid on the pot, crossed over to join his wife and sons. Staying on his feet, he looked down at them with great fondness.

‘Nearly there. I think I might have some wine myself, you know.’

He reached down, glugged out a glass, finishing the bottle, then raised it.

‘Here’s to us.’

The others echoed the toast. They all clinked glasses.

Then, smiling at Peter, Jane caught a glimpse of Roderick out of the corner of her eye; felt dread gnawing at her guts – his apron seemed bedabbled with blood. She turned sharply to look full at him. She had been imagining things, there were no gouts.

‘What’s the matter, my love?’ Roderick asked, gently.

‘I don’t know. I don’t feel quite myself again yet.’

‘You’ll get better, by and by, take my word for it. Especially with the three of us looking after you.’

‘Try not to worry, mum,’ Peter said.



‘I won’t.’ She turned to Roderick, ‘Thank you, darling.’

‘Don’t mention it. You’re my life after all.’

He craned across the table, kissed her. Then, standing straight again, he cleared his throat, grabbed, out of the air, an airy pen and pad.

‘Are you ready to order?’

Peter and Jeremy giggled.

Jane mimed mulling over a menu.

‘What would you recommend?’

‘Today’s special is the risotto, Madame.’

‘Sounds good. I think we’ll all have it.’

‘Excellent choice, Madame.’

Roderick went into the kitchen, came back bearing two steaming bowls, set them down before Peter and Jeremy. He returned to the stove, dished up his and Jane’s meals, brought them back.

‘Right, start while it’s hot,’ he said. ‘I’m just going to open another bottle of wine, won’t be a moment.’

Closing her eyes, Jane leaned forward over her bowl, breathing deeply. She retched - a fetor rose from it. Peering down through the steam she saw a pallid welter of maggots. Looking over to her sons, she gaped in horror to see Jeremy with a forkful of the moiling grubs poised halfway to his mouth. She leapt to her feet, knocked the fork from his grasp. It clattered to the floor.

The boys burst into tears. Turning to the bowls, Jane saw that they contained only tender fat unctuous grains of rice. She broke down, too.

Roderick appeared in the doorway.

‘What’s wrong?’

‘I’m sorry,’ Jane said. ‘I’m not myself. I think I need some fresh air. Can you get Jeremy another fork, darling? I won’t be long.’

She got to her feet, went out into the hall. What was wrong with her?

Opening the front door, she went outside, breathed in the cool night air, recovered a little. Then she took in the moon-litten prospect before her eyes – a barren plain, encircled by mountains. Vultures wheeled overhead

Whimpering, she sat down heavily. She hunched, shuddering a moment, blasted by horror. Then concern for her sons bested her fear, and she turned, went back inside the tower.

She found herself in a damp, gloomy chamber. Its ceiling beams were so low she was forced to stoop. Moonlight shining in through the open door pooled on the floorboards, but there was no other source of illumination, and it took her eyes a while to adjust to the murk. The furniture anticly aped that of the entrance hall of her house. Spread out before her was the rug she had noted before. Hunkering down beside it, she stroked it. Its pattern – blotches of muted colour – did recall a rug she had once owned, but there was something grotesque about it. Peering down, she realised its pile was of varying lengths, in some places very long. It was only when she drew close, gagged on the reek of blood, she realised what she was looking at – a patchwork of human scalps. Starting back, she stood, shaking. Peering into the gloom, she saw hanging on the wall to her left, on a scrap of animal hide, a crude painting in horrid mockery of a photograph she, Roderick, and Peter had once sat for, when Peter was just a baby.

Most of the appointments of the original were present in the travesty, though all were in some way weird, or shoddy. However, the doors which in Jane’s hall opened onto the dining and living rooms were here mere chalk sketches on the wall. Where then were her sons? She sighted a ladder ascending to a trapdoor in the ceiling, determined to try the upper chamber. Then she noticed, hanging on the wall opposite the dread portrait, a large tapestry that had no counterpart in her house. She crossed over to examine it. It was ancient, threadbare, and its

colours were dulled, but it was just possible to make out its design. It was a depiction of a hunting scene: a large number of figures, dressed in the garb of medieval peasants, milled about in the foreground, while, behind them, were three knights on horseback, one of whom was clad in swart armour. In the top left corner, a narrow fissure in a rocky escarpment could just be made out. There was an eerie sense of residual energy about the figures, as if they had been moving just moments before.

(Listening to Jane's description of the wall-hanging, Duncan, Elliot, and I turned to gauge William's reaction. However, though he was looking at the writer attentively, nothing in his expression indicated he had noticed the blatant evocation of his tale. It appeared Jane was also unaware of this. At the time I wondered whether she might have been maliciously trying to provoke upset, though it seemed out of character. Revelations later that evening suggested all our experiences had been wrought by a single malevolent entity, and also that – in a corollary of the notion the dreams of all mankind come from a collective pool of oneiric imagery – all uncanny experiences are drawn from a single well of horror, into which, from time to time, a poor unfortunate unwittingly lowers his pail.)<sup>12</sup>

Reaching out, Jane touched the arras. It gave slightly under her fingers, and she realised it covered an alcove. A morbid itch overwhelmed her fear and repulsion; she reached out, pinched the cloth between her thumb and forefinger, and drew it aside. The nook contained only a full-length mirror, but it was tarnished, cracked, fly-spotted, and warped, and, on catching sight of her bleary, writhen reflection, Jane recoiled in fright, staggering backwards, tripping, and sitting down heavily on the floor. Throwing out an arm to steady herself, she felt, beneath her hand, the rug yield, sag into a concealed opening.

Apparently something in the chamber below had been disturbed by the noise of Jane's fall, for at that moment she heard an odious scuttling rising through the floor. Getting hastily to her feet, she backed away, breathing hard. Suddenly the rug was seized from beneath, pulled down into a rough hatch sawn in the wooden boards. The scratching coming from the

cellar grew louder and more frantic. Edging closer and looking down into the hole, Jane saw a dingy oubliette, its floor covered with a filthy layer of sawdust, and strewn with bones. Then she glimpsed a ghastly mottled carapace, and a huge claw – there was some dread beast in the pit.

She ran for the ladder, climbed up, groping for the rungs, lifted the trapdoor, and clambered through.

The upper chamber was lit by sputtering rush torches in wall sconces. It bore a resemblance to the dining room in her house, but was a grisly sham. Peter and Jeremy sat on rickety, rotten chairs at a rotten, rickety table, devouring squirming filth by the forkful.

Behind them stood the quickened mummied husk of a man – an armature of yellowed bone swagged with shreds of grey muscle and tatters of leathery hide. It was clad in rags and a blood-spattered apron. The eyes sunk into its shrunken skull leered, the gaping raw rent of its mouth was twisted into a grin.

Jane moaned.

‘Are you alright?’ the thing Roderick had become asked, tenderly.

She struggled to compose herself, sore afraid of what the horror might do if it realised she was no longer cozened.

‘I’m sorry. I’m fine really. Just been feeling on edge.’

Suspicion glimmered in the thing’s eyes. Smiling wanly, Jane wracked her brains, but all seemed hopeless.

Then a change came over Jeremy. He had turned to look up at the ghastly thing, and had seemed to see something of its loathsome aspect. She tried to catch his eye, but was too late.

‘That’s not dad,’ he wailed.

Getting up from his chair, he ran, weeping, to Jane; she crouched down and took him in her arms.

‘Don’t worry,’ she consoled. ‘I’ll not let any harm come to you.’

Then she called out, 'Peter! Come here. We're leaving.'

Peter got to his feet, crossed over to the thing, and took hold of one of its shrivelled hands.

'I'll only come if dad comes with us,' he said.

'Peter, my love, that is not your dad. Your father is dead.'

'I don't believe you!'

'I'm sorry, but it's true. Jeremy, tell him.'

Jeremy peered around from behind Jane's legs, where he quailed.

'It's true, Peter,' he said. 'That's a monster.'

'What's got into you both,' the thing barked. 'Why are you being so hateful?'

'Peter, please come with me,' Jane begged.

The boy scowled, shook his head.

Frantic, Jane, her face set grim, moved towards him.

The thing reached with its right hand into the pocket of its apron, drew out a meat cleaver, and brandished it over Peter's head, where the boy could not see it. Jane backed away. Though it was cold, sweat pooled in the hollows of her collar bones. The thing's eyes glittered with triumph, and it let the hand in which it held the cleaver fall to its side.

At that moment, Jane, all but maddened by despair, rallied her routed wits. She realised her only hope was to entice Peter outside somehow – perhaps the sight of the desert waste would break the spell. If not she could maybe drag him bodily from that accursed place. She took Jeremy's hand, told him gently to get up, took him over to the hatch.

'Climb down, and wait for me at the bottom of the ladder,' she whispered. 'It will be dark, but don't be scared.'

'Alright mum,' the boy said through tears. 'But we're not leaving Peter, are we?'

'No, of course not. Now, be a brave boy, and climb down.'

The boy began his descent. Jane glanced over her shoulder. The thing seemed frantic, confused.

Jane followed Jeremy down the ladder. The outside door was shut once more, and it was very dark. As Jane descended, she heard the awful scrabbling rising from the cellar. Reaching the ground she felt about in the pitch. Her hands soon lighted on Jeremy. He flinched.

‘Jeremy, don’t worry, it is just me.’

‘Mum, what’s that noise?’

‘Don’t worry. Don’t move from here and I promise you’ll be safe. I’m going to go back up there in a minute and when I come down again I’ll have Peter with me. Then we can get away from here.’

She strove to sound confident, but in truth she despaired.

After waiting a moment, she climbed the ladder again. In the sham dining room, she saw Peter and the thing standing much as she had left them.

‘Do you think you can both forgive me?’

The thing narrowed its eyes.

‘It’s the strain of this book,’ she continued. ‘Writing’s hard at the moment. I’ve just bought Jeremy an ice cream to say sorry. Peter, would you like one? The van’s still outside.’

The boy bit his lip.

‘Jeremy’s had one?’

‘Yes.’

The boy squinted down at his feet.

Louring at Jane, the thing made stropping motions with its blade.

‘Can I have two flakes?’ Peter asked.

‘Of course you can.’

The boy started for Jane, but the thing held fast his hand.

‘Peter, can’t you see she’s trying to dupe you? It’s bitterly cold outside. There’s no ice-cream van.’

Looking up at the thing, Peter scratched his nape.

Then a cracked air sounded nearby. It was the carillon of an ice-cream van. Whence it issued Jane knew not. But it was her and her sons’ salvation.

A scurry – Peter darting forwards, the thing trying to hold him back. Sinews snapped, gristle grated, and the thing’s pale and mottled hand was wrested from its wrist.<sup>13</sup> Loosing its grip, the hand fell to the floor and scuttled after the boy.<sup>14</sup> Ungummed by the bad shock, the scales fell from his eyes, and he saw truly. The thing howled with pain and rage. Peter ran to his mother and cowered behind her. Stepping forward, she made to stamp upon the sundered, animate hand. It twisted away from her foot, fell onto its back and lay struggling, unable to right itself.

Gazing at Jane, baleful eyes filled with entreaty, glistening with tears, the thing spoke.

‘I wanted so badly for us to be a family again. Why wrench my sons from me? I’d rather us together in death, than apart in life!’

Brandishing the cleaver, it lurched towards Peter and Jane. Struck dumb by terror, mother and son backed toward the open trapdoor, began climbing down the ladder, Peter first. When nearly at its foot, Jane cast her eyes upward, saw, limned by the light spilling through the hatch, the thing descending, clumsily. Stepping off the bottom rung, she called her sons to her.

She herded them towards the chink of light marking the outside door, ensuring they kept to the wall. Then the thing slipped, lost its hold on the ladder, hit the boards with a noise like a dead, rotten bough falling. After lying prone a moment, it struggled to its feet. Its right socket was smashed, the eyeball dangled by a nacre chord and jounced against the rough grey skin of its cheek. Its jawbone hung askew, black tongue, shrivelled like a slug in brine, lolling. Staggering towards Jane and the boys it blundered into the pit. There rose a chittering and

scrabbling, and the thing that was once Roderick began to shriek. Jane opened the door, she and her sons flew through...

And stumbled, gasping into one of the Woolwich Foot Tunnel's lifts. The operator, an elderly woman, glanced up at them, smiled, nodded, pressed the button. Perhaps she thought they had merely been playing 'it'. On exiting the lift and stepping out into the waning light of late afternoon they found themselves on the south side of the Thames. Having walked to the edge of the river they looked out across it. Then Jeremy put his hand to his mouth, shuddered, and pointed down at the shingle beach beneath the footpath on which they stood. A dead swan lay on the pebbles, its wings spread as if it was about to take flight, its plumage muddied, its long neck crooked. There was a thin smear of blood on its beak.



## VII

I am writing this in a cabin far below decks on board the Ark. I fear these will be the last surroundings I shall ever know, a wretched thought (I quake now to think of how, when I first saw the hulk's name stencilled on the prow and transom, I thought it augured the vessel would prove a sanctuary). This cramped chamber was clearly an office once, for the only furniture it contains is a desk, a chair, and a locked filing cabinet. The tribeswoman and I are trapped, unable to leave this room to return to the companion hatch through which we entered the hold, even should we feel it worth, for a glimpse of daylight, delivering ourselves into the clutches of those waiting without.

Cut off from sight of the heavens, the passing of time is impossible to gauge with any nicety, but I conjecture we have been down here at least a fortnight. Our provisions have dwindled, though we have been parsimonious, and I have often gone without, knowing hunger can only cause me pain, not kill me. I fear they will all soon be consumed, and the tribeswoman will starve. I blame myself for the pass I have brought us to; we were safe, but I insisted we return to retrieve this manuscript and my typewriter. As it is, I now doubt I will have time to complete my work – I believe my age-old adversary was behind the attack that resulted in our confinement, and am afraid that, at any moment, he will burst in to torture me and brutally end my life (what saddens me even more is that the tribeswoman, if she has not by then succumbed to inanition, will doubtless share my fate). I must press on with haste if I am to have any chance of setting down all I wish to tell.<sup>1</sup>

Having just read over the corrected proofs of my account of Jane's tale and the conversation and events which preceded it – which my companion finished typing up earlier this morning – it occurs to me that for you, no matter whether you carefully, but quickly

scanned, merely glanced at, perused, or struggled over those pages, a relatively short interval has passed since the fight in which my forehead was laid open – for even the most assiduous or sluggardly it cannot have been more than an hour. Not so for me – it has been several weeks, the wound has long since healed. My work has been halting, hindered by tumultuous happenings.

I apologise if this meditation seems digressive, but, with my death seemingly imminent, time, which once hung so heavy on my hands, now seems rare again, and I feel compelled to hold it in my hands, and examine its facets – as a jeweller would, with a loupe screwed into his eye, a gemstone. I doubt much of that precious stuff remains to me.

But I am, with these musings, squandering the mean portion I still have before me – I must return to my tale. I simply wished to make it clear that, though for you, my reader, a relatively short time will have passed since the afternoon I returned to the Ark to find it under siege, in truth, it has been nearly a month. I have restrained myself from interrupting Jane's tale to describe the incidents that impeded my setting it down, so as to allow it to be told unbroken; I wanted to avoid diminishing its cumulative horror, and to give the reader a tolerably straight way. However, I hope I will be excused if I now devote some pages to a history of recent events.

After I began work on the melancholy epilogue to William's tale, the tribeswoman and I were granted a lull of several days, which I spent in writing for the most part, and she – having taken on much of the burden of providing for our basic needs – in collecting firewood, hunting, fishing, and foraging. She seemed happy with this role, was adept at these chores, more skilled than I. To ensure a fair division of labour, I took responsibility for cleaning, cooking, washing, and so forth. I was happy with this arrangement – my tasks were the less onerous, left me more time to work on this manuscript.

However, anxious to learn some of the skills she had picked up for surviving in the wild, I did, from time to time, accompany the girl on an excursion. On these trips she imparted to

me some of her lore: showed me how the pulp of bulrush stems damped and crushed between stones yielded long fibres that, once dry, could be stranded together to form a strong, flexible twine for snares; taught me that edible mushrooms, roots, berries, and nuts could be found by observing the habits of local creatures – birds flocking to a particular tree being a sign that it is fruiting, boars digging in the earth, an indication of the presence of comestible tubers, and so forth; and demonstrated the best way to harvest honey, which is to drowse the bees with smoke before reaching into the nest for the comb.

She and I communicate exclusively through gestures. Not since my first encounter with her, has she addressed me in her own tongue, and she does not try to convey anything by means of expressive vocalisations, something I find surprising, as it is natural to do so; I would believe her beating at the hands of the natives had struck her mute, but that I have heard her cry out in her sleep, and that she often lilts quietly to herself. These songs are repetitious and seem to me gibberish – meaningless sounds uttered solely for the pleasure taken in their musical quality.

The only thing that marred those peaceful few days were the pricks of my conscience; my remorse over the killing of the tribal leader. I will not claim I had never taken a life before – a life as long as mine cannot be free of stains – but I had hitherto always been sure my victims had lumps of black char where their hearts should have been. Though the woman had meant malice, I doubted she was truly wicked. I cursed myself for resorting to dire measures, for not being shrewd enough to find some means of forcing her, and her minions, to take flight; I was, after all, in no real danger. Harrowing dreams in which I watched, over and over, her final agonies, awoke me, night after night.

Still, despite this one blight, that period of calm was very happy. The tribeswoman and I grew close. On the afternoon of the sixth day, while trying to recall the exact words of the bewigged drunk's strange execration, in order to set them down, I heard the young tribeswoman screaming in terror. Fearing her former people had returned again, I dashed to

the gunwale and looked downriver, towards the stretch of strand where she had gone searching for razor clams for our supper. I saw her standing on top of a rock jutting up from the estuary mud, fending off, with the stick she had with her to dig up the clams, a pair of large reddish boar who scrabbled with their forehooves on the steep sides of the outcrop, thrusting with their tusks at her. As I watched she feinted at one, then dealt the other a cruel blow across its skull. Undeterred it lunged at her, gored her leg. She cried out, almost lost her balance. Descending the gangplank, I started out her along the shoreline, towards the scene of the skirmish, meaning to come to her rescue.

This, however, proved unnecessary – she was more than capable of defending herself. As I made for her, slowed by the difficulty of running on the miry flats, I saw she was ably keeping the hogs at bay. When I was close enough to see the tufts of bristles running along the ridges of their spines, she stabbed down with her stick, twice, striking the swine on their tender snouts. They bolted squealing.

Flinging away the branch, the tribeswoman clambered down off the rock and walked towards me, looking smug. On reaching me, she hiked up the hem of her shift to show me where the boar's tusk had gashed her, artlessly allowing me a brief glimpse of the pale flesh of her upper thigh. Experiencing a tremble of longing, such as I had not felt for a very long time, I looked away, abashed.

The wound was not deep, but we returned to the Ark to swab and dress it.

We spent the much of the rest of the afternoon together, collecting our evening's repast. Walking the shore, we kept a lookout for the dimples that are a telltale sign of the burrow of a razor clam. On spotting one, we would delve carefully in the mud. If we were successful in catching hold of the whetstone shellfish before it could dig deeper, we would haul it out, heft it, then either place it in the sack we toted about, or discard it if we thought it had scant meat. When we had gathered plenty of toothsome specimens, we returned to the Ark; I continued writing, and the tribeswoman went on shore. She returned just after sunset with a bunch of

spinach tied with twine; it was to accompany our meal. I stopped work, we shucked the molluscs, then cooked them up in the raked ashes of a fire. We feasted till the juices ran down our chins. That evening we were both strangely elated, perhaps it was the rich clamflesh made us so. We sat in the prow of the Ark and I taught the tribeswoman how to pick out some simple tunes on the banjo. Afterwards, I played for her. She sat rapt, with her eyes closed, humming to herself. The sky was clear, and, once I had tired, and my fingers were sore, we lay on our backs on the deck looking up at the bright, full moon, and the dredging of stars. I thought to show the girl the constellations of my youth, but found I had forgotten them. Instead, I made up fit-seeming names for the patterns I saw in the welkin, pointed them out: the courtesan, shielding her face with her fan; her suitor, the beggar boy, cap in hand; the snail; sail-fin shark; death's head hawkmoth; and spider monkey. I spoke hesitantly, in hushed tones, less out of an atavistic reverence for the cosmos, than a sleepy contentment. Finally, we retired, the girl to the pallet in the cabin, me to blankets spread out under my lean-to. I was filled with a great joy. However, something happened that night to dispel my happiness. I wrote an account of it the following morning, and perhaps it is best I should give you that version, composed when the disappointment was still fresh in my mind.

The girl came to me in my shelter as I slumbered last night, and woke me, gently, by stroking the deep scar cleaving my brow. When I opened my eyes, I saw, by the light of the gibbous moon, that she crouched on her haunches beside me, naked. I felt arousal for the first time in many ages, and I sat up, throwing off my blanket, took one of her breasts in my mouth, and put my hand between her thighs. She closed her eyes, bit her lower lip, and, seizing me by the nape, pulled me to her. Then we sank to the deck, and she straddled me, took my cock in her hand and sought to stick herself with it, only it was limp – I have been chaste too long. Grimacing, shamed, I pushed the woman aside. She looked at me, confused and hurt, then padded away. I lay awake staring up at the underside of the lean-to's thatched roof for some time.

This morning, when I woke the girl, she acted as if nothing had happened; I think it unlikely there will be any rekindling of lust.

This mantic shiver has proved false – we have again clinched, but our carnality was then born not of tenderness, but delirium. This frenzied, grotesque debauch, of which I will soon write, has finally snuffed all desire, though mute friendship between the tribeswoman and I has continued to grow.

As it turned out, the night of my humiliating impotence was to be the last we were to spend in peace; the following day the tribespeople attacked the Ark.

I woke early to a bright, clear morning. Leaning over the bowrail, I looked down at my reflection in the river far below; there was not a whisper of wind to ruffle it. Though it was cold, and my breath ghosted in the air, the pleasant warmth given off by the low sun hinted it would not remain so for long. I woke the girl. She seemed to be suffering slightly, squinted, clutched her skull, possibly as a consequence of the odd, if pleasant, fuddlement we had felt after eating the shellfish; I myself had a sore head. After breakfast, she returned to the helm, went back to sleep. I sat down at my typewriter to set down some brief accounts of recent events before my recollection of them faded.

I had only been working for a short time, just long enough to write the brief scene inserted above, when looking upriver I saw, stark against the pale wash of light in the sky, a disorderly rabble slowly approaching along the shoreline. Going to the ship's stern, I stood and watched as they drew nearer. The sound of shouts and the beating of drums carried to me across the flats. Then the sun rose clear of the haze at the horizon, and the sloblands gleamed; it was as if the mud blazed, as if the mob trudged on, unharmed, across a lake of fire. The clan had come to avenge the death of its leader, come for a reckoning.

Awestruck, sinews unstrung, squinting against the glare, I looked down at the rout. There were perhaps fifty of them – a mix of men, women, and children, all armed, even the youngsters, with an assortment of slings, cudgels, primitive swords, and blowpipes. It appeared they had chosen a new leader, for a young man garbed in purple walked a short

distance ahead of the rest – alone, a little haughty, but slightly bowed under the burden of responsibility, and looking over his shoulder often, as if he feared he had been made chief as a malicious prank, that, at any moment, the tribe might quietly, sniggering, run off and hide, leaving him all alone. A little behind him, in the van of the rabble, came the drummers, four burly men pounding out a driving rhythm. In the midst of the ruck that followed was a frame of stout tree trunks lashed together, on which an object, draped with a patchwork of animal hides, was being toted. I could not tell what it might be. Perhaps it was sacred to the tribe, for they crowded, clamoured, and fought to carry it; evidently it was heavy, for despite the many eager hands that held it aloft, those bearing it struggled.

Collecting myself, I called out to the young woman. She emerged, blinking, from the helm. It was too late to take flight; we would be seen and run down, for the gangplank was in full view of the clan. Together the girl and I winched it up, so they could not gain access to the deck by it, then returned to the taffrail to watch, silent and trembling, their approach.

They stopped a little distance from the ship, within a stone's throw of the transom. The drums fell silent. The curious burden was set down on the silt, and they began untying the thongs that held down its covering. Boosted up by the girl, I clambered onto one of the shipping containers scattered about the aft-deck, then roared, loud and minatory. The rabble, however, were not cowed. A few slingstones were loosed at me, and I climbed back down, sheltered with the girl behind the bulwarks. After a few moments, I raised my head to peer over the gunwale. What I saw snatched at my heart.

The unwieldy object the mob had brought with them lay, revealed, on the glistening mud. It was a catapult. Several of the tribe busied themselves about it, priming the mechanism. A rough ball of some dark stuff was loaded into the metal bucket attached to the end of its firing arm. Then the chieftain, who had stood aloof from these proceedings, crossed over to the engine. Everyone else stepped back. A young woman handed him a flaming brand; he set light to the projectile, then knelt down to release the trigger.

The fiery missile soared high over the Ark, arcing through the air like a comet, trailing a sooty tail. I ran to the prow to see where it would land. It came down upon a sandbank, out in the river, bursting apart in a hail of burning fragments.

The girl was waving frantically at me, trying to attract my attention; I returned to the stern. Looking over the side, I saw the tribe swarming round the mangonel, reloading it, making adjustments; I feared they would not miss a second time.

I cudgelled my brains for a way to escape our desperate plight. I fretted for the tribeswoman's life. I worried for mine also, for, though the clan's bombardment could not kill me, it might leave me sorely burned, unable to flee or defend myself, and I feared, you see, the din and smoke might draw my enemy – chaos is to him what carrion is to crows.

Then I remembered the grappling iron. Beckoning the young woman to follow, I ran over to the wheelhouse, and, rummaging around in our scanty pile of possessions, laid hold of this thing, plus a bag of provisions, my knife, and my torch. Crossing over, I hooked the grapnel to a capstan in the prow, and threw the rope attached to it over the portrail. Its fall was concealed from the tribe by the bulk of the freighter. I indicated to the girl that she should climb down. She went over the side and began her descent, clambering hand over hand. While waiting for her to reach the ground I looked about me and caught sight of the desk I had been writing at, on which sat, piled, the pages of this manuscript, weighted, as a precaution against gusts, by the typewriter.

I was seized by a desire to save these objects from destruction. Leaning over the gunwale, I gestured to the tribeswoman she should bide for me, then ran over to the table. I moved the typewriter aside, cast about for twine with which to bind my narrative, saw a ball under my desk. Reaching down to pick it up, I sighted two blank reams down there, so took one, loosely tied it and my narrative together, then gathered up the ancient mechanism and the stack of paper. Carrying these things over to one of the metal shipping containers, I went inside,



cleared a space amid the draff, and deposited them in a dingy corner, in the hope they might not be discovered there.

As I ran back across the hulk a lump of flaring pitch fell from the sky and, striking the deck near our teetering stack of firewood, flew apart in a swirl of molten tar. The logs were soon ablaze. Smouldering cinders, carried by the breeze, whirling through the air like the windborne seeds of sycamore or ash trees, spread the fire, alighting on the thatched roof of the lean-to, some bundles of reeds the girl had planned to work into twine for fishing lines, and a heap of boar hides from which I had intended to fashion some new garments. Some of the smuts, blown towards me, kindled my clothes; I threw myself down and rolled to put out the flames. Then, getting to my feet, I hastened to the prow, scrambled over the bowrail, and slid down the rope; the skin was flayed from my palms. I plashed down, sank into the sludge to my knees. The girl, who was crouching a little distance off, waiting, crossed over, hauled me from the mire. My legs came free with a croak like the call of a toad. I staggered to my feet. Then a loud report rolled upon our ears – another projectile had struck the deck of the Ark.

The girl and I loped across the flats toward the river, waded in, and began swimming for the far bank. We strove to keep the freighter's bulk between us and the rabble, but the rising tide proved too strong and we drifted upstream into their purview. Still, we were not spotted until, midstream, forced to clamber over a sandbank. Then, catching sight of us, one of the mob hollered, pointed us out. The catapult was in a shallow delve, so, to take aim at us out on the water, the tribe was forced to lug it up onto a nearby knoll. But, by the time they had done so, and reloaded, we had gained the far bank and hidden in a stand of reeds; they did not loose off the shot.

We peered back through the canes at the Ark. A dense roiling plume of black smoke rose from the fires raging on board. As we watched, the lean-to collapsed with a flurry of sparks. Some clansmen, who had climbed up using grapnels, darted hither and thither, scouring the deck; their ragged forms seen in silhouette before the flames seemed those of roisterers in

some dark revel. Once they were satisfied no one was left on board – presumably they were convinced by the grime caking the seal of the companion hatch that it had not been opened in centuries – they clambered back down to the flats, crossed over to where the rest awaited them. Then a small group broke away, walked a little distance off, and sat down in a circle. The clan elders, I supposed, conferring. After a short while, their council over, these men rose, rejoined the throng. The chieftain gave orders, and all crossed to a copse beyond the flats, began hacking down trees; lumber for rafts, I surmised. The girl and I turned, stole away.

We ran north through a pleasant country lying under a patchwork of grassland and bosage – a land of shady groves where finches twittered in the branches, and pheasants strutted through the undergrowth; and of pastures where rabbits disported, hares loped, grasshoppers chirred, and herds of sheep wandered, grazing pensively, looking askance at the ground, seeking portents in the sod, bleating sorrowfully as if the omens boded ill.

On the second night of our flight, I was roused by a dread howl. Stark against the new-risen full moon, craters sooty fingerprints on tallow, was the silhouette of a wolf, head thrown back, maw agape. The girl, who had also started from her slumbers at the noise, sat up rubbing her eyes. I pointed out the beast to her, but it had slunk away. My sleep was troubled the rest of the night, as was the girl's to judge by the whimpering she made. At one point I lay awake for a time watching the moon move across the sky, straining my ears for the muffled whirr of the mechanism that drives the universe.

We broke camp early the following morning and, after a short way, came to a brook. Turning, we saw the tribe had followed us – a thread of smoke furrowed the sky to the south, the fire could not be far off. I was bewildered at first, for we had painstakingly muddied our tracks, but then I heard the yapping of hounds.

The girl pointed at the rill, walked her fingers through the air. I pondered the gesture a moment before I realised what she was proposing – wading along the watercourse for a distance, rather than crossing to the nearest point on the far bank. In that way we could perhaps break the scent trail. I nodded, she removed her sandals, and I took my boots off, and rolled up my trouser legs. Then we entered the water. It was shallow, came only to my knees, but was bitterly cold. We chose to head upstream, for that way lay behind the cover of briar thickets. After trudging against the swift flow till fatigued, till our breathing was ragged, we clambered out onto the north bank of the watercourse, lay down to rest. The sky was clear, the morning had waxed warm, and, worn out by the exertions and worries of the last days we fell into a doze. On stirring, I looked up, saw the sun had reached its zenith. Cursing the lapse – we had doubtless lost any lead our contrivance might have gained us – I shook the girl awake. We hurried on our way.

Mid-afternoon we sighted a tract of gloomy firs up ahead – by dusk we had reached the treeline. We spent the night there, on the edge of the forest.

The next day, rising before sunup, we sighted the fitful glow of a fire close behind, and were forced to press on into the pines.

The serried boles of the trees grew severe, limbless, until far above, where sidegrowth began, and gnarled black boughs clad in dark needles all but blotted out the sky. Points of daylight in interstices strewed the canopy with counterfeit stars. It was as if night had won a victory in that place and the land had been forever ceded to it by day. The undergrowth was sickly saplings, clumps of nettles, and bramble snares; it swarmed with vile insects. Of higher life there was no sign, though we did occasionally hear, in the distance, the sound of some large creature crashing through the scrub.

We pressed on into the wretched woodland, where I hoped the clan would be loath to follow. By scoring the trees with my knife – nicks low down on the trunks which would not be noticed by anyone not looking for them – I marked our path. After a few hours, afraid to go

any further lest we lose our way, we stopped, decided to encamp. We built a hut from fallen branches, for we had no tools with which to hew wood, my blade being too small for the task.

I have been musing abstractly on my tale a short time and realised I am now, and not for the first time while writing this account, in three different places at the one time. It is uncanny. At the present moment I am huddled with the girl, in our makeshift dwelling in the forest, peering warily into the dismal pines that surround us; but I also gawp, stunned, at Jane in the Nightingale, having just heard her story; and, furthermore, sit at a desk in a cabin in the Ark's rusting hull, rhapsodizing all these affairs. It is disconcerting – I hope by the end of my narrative, I will have collected myself. I had better press on.<sup>2</sup>

I return, then, to the drear woods. That forest was a sepulchral place, apart from the quick world. The rank foliage overhead, choking the sky, oppressed us, though we were grateful for its sheltering shroud on the second day when we heard rain threshing the treetops, saw water running in rivulets down the trunks, and realised another storm had broken over the region.

Foraging yielded little – some bland mushrooms with dun caps, a few grouse and pheasant carcasses, riddled with maggots, but just edible – and the supplies I had managed to grab before fleeing the Ark dwindled, within a fortnight were all but exhausted. I realised we would have to return to the rich land we had left behind us, or else the girl would starve. I just hoped the natives would not be lying in wait for us there.

Early one morning, we set out. We followed my blazes for a time, but then came to a place where swathes of bark had been stripped from many of the boles, perhaps by beasts whetting their horns, antlers, or tusks. Too many of my notches had been obliterated – the trail was lost. Given that I have spent many millennia poring over books, it might be supposed my brain is crammed with much useful knowledge. The truth is, as I have previously mentioned, my memory is unfitted to diuturnity; I could not dredge up any learning to aid us in our plight,

though I must surely have encountered something on the subject of getting one's bearings in woodland in the course of all my reading. Had I been alone I might have been damned to wander those cursed tracts forever, but the tribeswoman knew some forest lore, discovered where south lay by scrutinising the dull green and orange mottles of lichen on the tree trunks, and, by dusk, had led us to the edge of the woods.

By certain landmarks I recognized we were very close to the spot where we had spent our last night under the stars. The tribe had clearly been camped there, bidding for us – the meadow was strewn with the embers of fires, cornhusks, apple cores, and the picked carcasses of sheep and fowl. It seemed the watch had been abandoned some time before. The clan had left behind, as if accidentally, some parcels of nuts, berries, and dried fruit wrapped up in spinach leaves – famishing, the young woman and I fell to eating these sweetmeats.

The victuals were tainted. The bane coursed through our wasted frames, maddened us. Though it was cold, we took off our clothes, cavorted naked, and, clinching, danced a grotesque shuffle. Then, stumbling, we fell to the floor. I groped the tribeswoman, kneaded her breasts, fumbled between her thighs. Howling, she elbowed me in the face. Tears blurred my vision; she tore free, got to her feet, and stood over me, trembling, glaring at me with disgust. Recovering my wits, I staggered to my feet, approached her, arms open, sheepish, penitent; still she turned and ran, bare and wailing, past a holly bush that grew at the forest's edge, bright red berries lone goutts of colour against the firs. She yelped, she had passed too close, the sprays of dark green leaves had scratched her, then entered the trees. I made to follow her, but griping pain flared in my gut, and I keeled over retching, passed out.

I have pledged to write only what is veracious; pondering how most faithfully to relate the events of the day following my poisoning, I find myself facing a crux. Things occurred that were of so gruesome a cast I believe them to have been born of delirium – vivid hallucinations brought on by the venom – but, given the horrors I have undergone in the past, I have no way

of knowing this for certain. Equally, I cannot be sure that, of the perfectly plausible happenings, some were not delusive, indeed one of these, though not eldritch, many may find incredible – it is an act of genuine altruism.

But now I muse on truth I realise, having listened in my long life to many wizened philosophers, mystic crones, foolish striplings, and mendacious tyrants spouting myriad conceptions of it, I have actually lost all faith in the idea. I was born and raised during the Age of Reason's dotage in the city that, though not its cradle, had been the beating heart of the nation that spawned its most fervent torch-bearers. My youthful education was based on its central tenet – the idea that truth could be approached through the painstaking observation of phenomena – but after attaining adulthood, I was disabused of this notion – by the late twentieth century, empiricism was discredited, little more than a pedagogical tool, a fable for children. As a means of comprehending the world it had proved untenable. As a consequence of its ruin, people – desperate to make sense of their lives – sought solace in all manner of wayward metaphysics whose varied assertions about the nature of knowledge and truth led to an epoch of warring systems – the silent and apparently immobile soil of the Enlightenment era was suddenly riven with flaws, the ground once again stirred under mankind's feet.<sup>3</sup>

Since that time, as I have mentioned, I have encountered an abundance of disparate ways of comprehending the world, each with its own definition of truth – perhaps I can best explain what I mean by giving examples.

I once spent several years living in a wretched city known as Naufana. To reach it, I had to cross barren tracts of red sand where travel was only possible at night, for the daylight hours had to be passed sheltering from the relentless fervour of the sun.

East of Naufana, across an arid riverbed, was a desolate place called Ghadis; once a prosperous and magnificent centre of the silk trade, it had been laid waste by pestilence many centuries before I first saw the dark shape of its ruined minarets and cupolas fretted from the

rising sun; it was then home only to small lizards with iridescent markings that basked on its roof terraces, and in its public squares.

Naufana's pretty skyline of spires, copper domes, and azure-tiled roofs, belied the peril, squalor, and wantonness of its streets, which were riddled with vice – the city's rulers adhered to a doctrine, established at the time the plague stalked Ghadis, which proclaimed all illusory and nothing true, thus everything was permitted.<sup>4</sup>

At another time, I resided for some years amid the decaying sprawl of a city that I believe had once been called, as others are, by a name whose origins either lay in folk tale, or was a corruption of that of a local river or early leader. When I knew it, however, the place was scarred by an epithet that had been coined by an outsider for the many competing, dissonant tongues of its inhabitants: Babel. I can recall only fleeting impressions of it: a dilapidated opera house, with a portico supported by coyly veiled caryatids carrying urns, and an entablature ornamented with a graven frieze – a delicate bas-relief depicting two men swathed in thick furs, darting barbed lances at a forlorn sea-cow; a pleasure canal, on the banks of which I spent many hours in quiet contemplation, watching couples rowing hither and thither aimlessly in boats with papier mâché figureheads in the forms of various game animals – warthogs, stags, swans, and sloths; a square crowded with the striped booths of fortune-tellers; a tavern in a dingy alley, where I drank gin with a veteran who had lost his left eye to shrapnel in a mortar bombardment; the streets of the industrial district, where I was forced to grope my way along the walls of the factories and warehouses through a sallow smother of smog; a slum tenement reflected in the waters of a murky river; and the prospect from the roof of the Mantic Tower – a tower of open-faced flint atop a bluff overlooking the city – of all laid out like the wares in a confectioner's window. Babel was ruled by an oppressive government that, in the sway of philosophers that proclaimed the truth of all things and intent on maintaining the submissive ignorance of the populace, prohibited everything.

Obviously the notions of truth central to the metaphysics of Naufana and Babel are extremes on a spectrum of possible understandings; in the course of my interminable wanderings upon the face of this globe I have encountered thinkers espousing all possible shades in between.

I find I must again apologise for a lengthy digression; it is my hope, however, that it has not been entirely without value, that I have demonstrated there is no single truth, only a proliferation of divers ones. Given that, it is perhaps best I set down all my recollections of the period when the bane had me in its grip without attempting to thresh fact from figment.

A heavy downpour revived me. It was night and pitch black – not a star could be seen through the wrack. I was parched, so lay with my mouth open to the deluge while it lasted. That was not long, though, and I was still dry when it stopped. Therefore, I was glad to see, by faint gleams, rain had pooled in hollows; to slake my thirst, I crawled over to one of these sumps, lowered my mouth to the water, and gulped it down. Afterwards, I lay still on my back for a time, weak, gut-sore, swollen.

I again passed out. When I came to once more, it was day. It was not sunlight had roused me, however – the sky was grey – but the cawing of a murder of carrion crows that had settled on the turf near me. Frail, unable to bestir myself, my feeble attempts to scare the birds off meeting with derisive croaks, I was terrified they meant to glut themselves on my wan flesh. But, scorning the meagre meat on my bones, they merely strutted and preened their feathers. After a short while one of them perched atop my belly, spread its wings wide, and, its throat juddering, kecked up a seed, and sowed it, with its jetty beak, in my navel. Then the flock took flight, all at once.

I lay still, unable to move, while the seed sprouted, put forth a shoot. Soon this scion was a tiny apple sapling. Its roots delved agonisingly into my innards. Growing, the dwarfish tree clad itself in foliage, blossomed, fruited, then shed its leaves, many times over, in fleet



succession. As the sun had broken through the lowering cloud, hung low on the horizon, the tree cast a shadow that crept up over my abdomen and ribs. Then, when its crown, no bigger than my head, occulted the dull red orb sun, the tree was blighted. This was at the beginning of one of its hectic springs, and the buds it put forth withered on the bough. Pallid, tallowy growths like writhen fingers sprouted from the apple tree's bark. Foul cankers swelled its blasted limbs. Then these galls burst, each letting fall a hail of maggots, which, landing on my flesh, burrowed beneath my skin. I closed my eyes and howled; black torpor swaddled me a third time.

I was awakened by further rainfall. It was night once more. The unearthly apple tree was gone; my belly, paunchy with the bloating of the poison, was unriddled. I felt little better, but had just enough strength to struggle to my feet. My garments lay where I had cast them off, and, struggling – the drenched cloth clung – I dressed. Shambling by the holly bush whose prickles had raised red weals on the tribeswoman's naked flank, I pushed into the woods where I had seen her enter them. I felt sure she was dead – it was a fell bane – but I wanted to find her corpse, bury it, keep scavengers from gorging on her honey-coloured flesh. I searched fruitlessly for a short time, the weakness overcame me once more and, feeling oppressed by the gloom under the canopy of twisted boughs, I returned to the open. I had surmised the girl would not have got far before succumbing; clearly she was tougher than I had thought.

Out under the sky once more, I found the rain had abated, though it was still mizzling. I gathered, from the faint skein of red at the eastern horizon, dawn was not far off. I was not cheered by this thought, however – I thought it unlikely the sun would burn through the thick cloud. Then, looking to the south, I saw the moiling black forms of an approaching throng against the grey in the sky; I figured it was the clan returning to check whether their scheme had worked, and if so to gloat. At first I thought of flight, but I was too sick and weary. Furthermore, the tribe, on not finding any bodies, would doubtless reason their poisoned victuals had gone uneaten, and not abandon their pursuit. I decided the best course was to

remain where I was, and feign death – I can stop my lungs indefinitely, though it burns, can live without breathing. This scheme was fraught with danger, though – if I was found out, I feared I would be too feeble to resist any attempts to snuff my quenchless life, and might suffer hideous pangs. But I decided it was worth venturing, for if I cozened them, they would then, I hoped, believing me dead, leave me alone. Besides, I perhaps had a little fight left in me, if it came to it. So I lay down, sprawled on the damp sward, gazing vacantly into the air, and waited.

I lay there for some time. The drizzle stopped falling, the clouds dispersed, and I saw a skein of geese pass by, far overhead. I heard footsteps approaching, held my breath. A wreath of snarling faces formed around the edges of the scrap of sky that lay before my dull, fixed stare. I was peered at, prodded, spat upon, kicked; all of which I submitted to without flinching. Apparently satisfied, the tribe turned away. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw them fall to gathering the mushrooms that had sprung up from the sodden soil. Only the clan's leader remained standing over me, staring down, his mien inscrutable. While I lay there, willing him to turn his back, I felt a large bug crawling upon my neck. It scuttled, on its spindly legs, over my matted beard, then across my cheek – I felt its feelers tickling the inside of my nostrils, and its mandibles raking my skin. Then, crawling over the ridge of my cheekbone, it nestled down in the hollow of my right orbit, its segmented underside pressed against my cornea.

I could not suppress a shudder. Paling, breathing in sharply, the chieftain crouched down at my side. Filled with dread, I had determined to leap to my feet, take to my heels, though I thought it unlikely I could outpace the natives, when, the leader laid his hand on my arm, and mouthed something at me. Of course, the workings of his jaws and lips were meaningless to me, but his kindly expression made his meaning clear enough. I know not why, but I felt I could trust him, made no move to run, though I remained tensed for flight. Then he reached out, plucked the insect from my eye, cast it away; I was assured of his kindness. Standing

once more, he turned, addressed the clan. They gathered about him. He spoke at length in the natives' strange tongue, which sounds, to my ears, like pebbles grinding against the rocky bed of a swift flowing mountain stream. Then the mob struck out for the south, and, I presumed, home, left me alone. I lay stock still a while, then tried getting to my feet. But I was too weak – my efforts were in vain.

Some time later, night slouched into the sky's arena, day turned tail and fled. I tried crawling to the shelter of the trees, but I was still sore fatigued, and it proved too onerous – I resigned myself to sleeping out in the open. But though enervated, my brain was feverish, my repose fitful – sporadic bursts of slumber, long periods of wakefulness. At one point I was roused by the dread screech of an owl. I had been dreaming of London, as it was in my youth, but desolated – beset on all sides by encroaching desert wastes, its streets choked by drifts of ashen sand. Looking up at the sky, I saw a meteor shower in the east.

The following morning I was woken by fingers pressed to the pulse in my neck. Peering about blearily, I saw a hazy form crouched next to me. I blanched from this apparition, fearing my enemy had found me at last, but, rubbing my eyes, saw it was the tribeswoman. The uncanny feeling – of having known her at some time in the past – I had remarked when she first accosted me, returned, this time stronger, and more disquieting. But then I recalled I had thought her dead, and it was all but dissipated (I wonder now whether she bears a resemblance, in certain lights, to a long-ago acquaintance). I looked her over warily, but she seemed real enough – not a phantasm – and so she has proved to be. I can only assume she had spewed up the poisoned food soon after fleeing into the forest, and that this saved her. In any case, I was so glad to see her alive, I did not long ponder this. It appeared she had recovered her wits, for she had found and put on her clothes. She smiled at me then, reached out and took my hand. I was relieved she had forgiven me the brutish way I acted when deranged by the bane.

The poison lingered in our blood and only after resting several days did we feel strong enough to move on from that place. I was then seized by a powerful desire to recover this manuscript, which I sought to convey to the girl by means of gestures – pointing to the south, I sketched the outline of the Ark in the air with my forefinger, mimed typing. A look of fear flitted across her features and she shook her head; frantic, I got down on my knees, looked up at her in mute appeal, and wrung from her a nod of acquiescence (thinking of this now, I am filled with anger at my folly, and guilt over the way I coerced the tribeswoman with my pitiful mumbled pleas). Rightly chary, she insisted we stock up on provisions before setting out. As that land abounded with good things, it was an easy matter to acquire enough food for several weeks. We snared rabbits and hares, and shot birds down out of the trees with a sling made from a leather thong; cured the meat by smoking it; spent many hours digging up tubers that we knew were good to eat; collected and dried mushrooms; picked nuts and berries; and stitched from deerhide, and proofed with a mix of tallow and beeswax several waterskins, which we filled from a stream.

When prepared, we set out for this rusting hulk. On reaching the estuary's north bank early in the morning of the fourth day, we concealed ourselves in the same brake of rushes we had hidden in before, and watched the ship until late afternoon. We saw no sign of any sentries. Concluding all was clear, we swam across the river, and climbed aboard the Ark by means of the tribe's ropes, which still dangled from the gunwales. The deck was strewn with clinker, the charred remnants of the things we had gathered to make the place a home. Some of the wheelhouse windows had melted in their sashes; the glass had run, puddled on the deck, then cooled – these patches, reflecting the blue sky, looked like limpid pools.

We crossed over to and entered the gloomy interior of the shipping container I had concealed this manuscript and my typewriter in. Once my eyes had adjusted, I saw they had escaped harm, reached down to pick them up. The tribeswoman, at my side, idly knocked her knuckles against the ridged metal walls, setting up a hollow clanking. Lifting the typewriter, I

saw a number of symbols underneath, scored into the floor. They were vaguely familiar, though meaningless to me.

As I straightened up, typewriter under one arm, bundle of papers under the other, a blast shook the ship. I crossed to the door and peered out. I saw immediately we had been gulled – it was a trap. The clan must have been hiding and watching somewhere nearby – a number of them milled about the catapult, out on the flats a little distance from the Ark's starboard flank, the rest girded the hulk. I turned back to the girl, hanging my head, remorseful. Pushing past me angrily, she looked out of the opening. She gasped, then turned back to me. I had thought our dire situation would spur her to rage, that she might rail at me in her guttural tongue, strike me with her fists, or at least fix me with a stare of reproach, but she apparently managed to choke her temper, merely shrugged her shoulders, smiled wanly. I could not forgive myself so easily, however, have cursed my rashness again and again this last three or so weeks. I have also often pondered why it was the natives lay in wait for us at the Ark. All my musings lead me to one awful conclusion. As I feel it unlikely the chieftain revealed my contrivance – his lenity seemed genuine – the tribe must have somehow learnt of my immortality. Moreover, they would have had no reason for assuming I would return to the Ark unless my manuscript had been discovered by someone who realised I would risk all to get it back, which could only have been someone able to read this long extinguished language. I fear, therefore, my dread enemy was behind the ambush.

Whilst the tribeswoman and I wavered in the mouth of the container, unsure what best to do, a projectile struck the starboard bulwarks not far from us, burst apart, spraying the deck with burning tar. As if my memory had been kindled by a burning smut, I then recalled where I had seen the sigils graved on the container's floor before – on the buttons of the keypad attached to the companion hatch. I thought it possible one of the ship's crew had etched the code that would open a combination lock in that unobtrusive corner of the freight container. I

knew, of course, it might just be some random phrase, or reckoning in the language, or digits of the culture that built the Ark, but thought it worth trying – the hold might prove a haven.

I went back over to the symbols, carved them upon my brain, then, signalling to the girl to follow me, went outside. We dashed for the foredeck, I encumbered by my manuscript and typewriter. As we ran, a missile struck the container in which we had been hiding. Reaching the trapdoor, I put down my things, crouched to study the keypad. Then I heard one of the tribe cry out in anguish, and, turning, saw a seagull, perhaps the same I had seen a number of times before, stooping on those gathered about the catapult, stabbing with its keen beak, hindering them, gaining us some time. My blood hammering in my ears, my hand trembling, I tapped in the sequence of characters I had memorised into the keypad. Nothing happened. I cursed, thumped the hatch until my hands were slick with blood. The girl, kneeling beside me, bit her lip, shook her head.

Rousing myself, I looked to natives huddled around the weapon on the slob. One stood fainting aloft at the bird with his sword; the blade grazed its wing and, squawking, it soared out of reach; a ray of sunlight gilded the twin arches of its pinions.<sup>5</sup> The bird driven off, those around the mangonel went back to loading it. I knew they had the range of the hulk, and that, even if we were to scurry haphazard about the deck we could not dodge the missiles forever. Despairing, I blinked back tears. Then the girl grabbed my shoulder, shook me. I turned. She motioned frantically at the scuttle. It was revolving slowly, lifting; the filth clogging its seal was shed in strips like peeled orange rind. Once it was above the level of the deck there was a crunch of gears meshing, and it began to move to one side, setting up a metallic wailing. An opening was revealed beneath. Taking my torch out of my pocket, I probed the gloom. A flight of metal steps descended into darkness. Dust motes, stirred by the air soughing in through the companion, traced slow whorls in the beam of light. I stared, transfixed. Then a barked command from one of the tribe elders who was overseeing the loading of the catapult

restored me to my senses. I motioned to the girl that we should climb down through the hatchway.

Once inside, I hewed at the murk with the beam of my torch, illuminating our surroundings piecemeal. Noticing a button on the underside of the deck, I reached up and pressed it. The hatch began to eclipse the opening once more. Dazed with relief, it was not until a mere thin crescent of sky remained that I recalled my manuscript and typewriter. Thrusting my hands out in a panic, I seized and dragged those things through the fast waning aperture.

Had my stupor lasted a moment longer, the gap would have been too narrow and this manuscript would have been lost; immediately the scuttle occluded the hatchway, a thunderous report from above told of a projectile striking the foredeck directly over our heads. Searing heat forced us down the stairs. We soon reached their foot and found ourselves at one end of a long narrow corridor.

I will write, in the future, of the horrors of the hold. But for now I feel I had best press on with that part of my narrative which concerns the evening I and the others learned of our curse, the night we spent drinking and telling our stories of terror in the Nightingale. Before I do so, however, I must – lest my narrative be too confused, tortuous – briefly explain how the tribeswoman and I came to be in the straits I described at the beginning of this chapter – confined to a cabin far below decks. It is not that there is a physical impediment to our egress from this place – the doorway is not blocked on the outside by crates fallen from a precarious pile we knocked against on entering, the door did not swing shut behind us and lock automatically – as you might have anticipated. The reason is simple: the batteries of my torch have given out. We have illumination in this office as a consequence of the one appointment I did not previously mention – an oil-burning generator, that, when we discovered it, had a full fuel reservoir. By the last of the torch's flickering light, the tribeswoman managed to get this machine working and hook it up to a bulb which dangles by a long cable from the ceiling. It

runs with only a slight whirring noise. It is fixed down, cannot be moved, and therefore we are constrained to remain in the office – were we to attempt to find our way back to the companion, or set out to search the hold for provisions or anything else of use, we would become lost in the dark, mazy, and horror-ridden ways and soon rave.

I do not understand why my dread foe, whom, I believe, now has the tribe under his dominion, has not sent them in to capture or bolt us yet. Possibly he means to wrack me by leaving me to languish here. And it does distress me sorely to see the girl waste away. But he does not know of the light source, without which I would have been maddened long ago, nor that I am, in some ways, glad of the reprieve, for it allows me time to write, to set down as much as possible of what remains of my tale. With this task to inspirit me, I think but rarely on my dire situation and my impending agonising death.



## VIII

While Jane told her story, the rest of us sat appalled but in thrall, barely aware of our surroundings, of the Nightingale's other patrons. Her tale concluded, she put her elbows on the table, slumped forward, cradling her head in her hands. The rest of us sat staring morosely into our drinks. None of us saw the pint I had set before the empty chair fall. It hit the ground, the glass smashed, and we all blanched. The lager soaked into the sawdust, staining it a dark russet, the colour of the skin of a blighted apple.

'Fuck!'

William winced, rubbed his eyes. He had grown pale.

'Strange,' I said. 'It wasn't anywhere near the edge.'

Duncan pointed to a pool of beer on the table.

'It must just've skated on that. Aye, that'll be it.'

Jane shook her head, eyes wide with terror.

I went to the bar, asked the barman for a dustpan and brush, and a cloth. Returning to the table, I squatted, wiped up the spill, swept up the shards, my hands shaking the while. The others sat in fraught silence.

When I sat back down at the table, I made a vain attempt to rouse them from their shocked trance with a witticism I do not recall now, but received no response bar a grimace from Claire. Then Elliot tugged on each of his fingers in turn until the knuckles cracked; William cringed at the noise. Jane began to sob, quietly, into the sleeve of her jumper; the rest of us regarded her awkwardly.

And so we remained for a time. Claire was the first to offer Jane consolation. Getting to her feet, she crossed over, and put an arm around Jane's shoulders.

‘There, there,’ she said, like someone comforting a child.

Jane stopped crying and looked up at her, bemusement and gratitude warring in her expression. I too was puzzled. My initial opinion of Claire had been awry – I had thought her obtuse, and callous, an impression confuted by this sensitive, considerate action. It was me who was dull-witted for thinking I could so swiftly grasp someone’s nature entire.

Reaching into her pocket, Jane brought out a handkerchief, dabbed her eyes, and blew her nose.

‘Why did you give up writing?’ I asked, gently.

‘How did you know about that?’

‘It was in the newspapers.’

‘Of course. Yes, I hadn’t the heart to make things up anymore.’

William sighed, rubbed his eyes, smiled wanly, lit a cigarette.

‘What about your sons?’ he enquired. ‘Are they alright?’

‘I don’t know. I’ve only once discussed that time in the foot tunnel with them, not long afterwards. They were reluctant to talk about it, but when pressed said we’d played a game, I had chased them pretending to be a monster, that nothing strange had happened.’

Jane paused, guddled for the wedge of lime in her drink, squeezed it.

William peered keenly at her.

In response to his unspoken question, she nodded.

‘They have changed though. Those carefree youngsters who larked in the fountain that afternoon are gone, I fear for good,’ she went on. ‘Jeremy has been shy, nervous ever since that afternoon, Peter, taciturn, sullen. Sometimes I catch them whispering together, but they won’t talk to me about what oppresses them.’

She began weeping again. Aside from Elliot, who seemed tired and a little distant, we tried to comfort her, but she waved aside our feeble, if sincere, words of solace. Then, stemming her tears, she looked up at us, a forced grin twisting her countenance.

‘I lost more than just my faith in the appearance of things, back then. A lot more.’

‘Jane, listen...’ I began, but she interrupted me.

‘I don’t want to talk any more about it, at least not for the moment.’

Claire tactfully proposed we hear someone else’s tale.

Duncan spoke up.

‘I’ll go next.’

Then, slightly shamefaced, added, ‘That is, if the two of you don’t mind, like.’

He looked to Claire and Elliot.

Claire shook her head.

‘No, of course not.’

Elliot was staring up at the worm-eaten ceiling beams, seemingly lost in his own thoughts. Duncan reached out and prodded him.

‘What do you say?’

‘Sorry? What?’

Duncan looked mildly vexed, but said gently, ‘No bother. Just wondering if you’d mind if I went next. You know, to tell my story.’

‘No. Go ahead.’

‘Well, if you’re sure.’

‘Duncan,’ I broke in. ‘Do you mind waiting just a moment?’

‘No problem.’

I got unsteadily to my feet, drunker than I had previously realised. There was a dull ache behind my eyes. Crossing to the toilet – the ‘gents’, traditional schematic representation of a male human form, like a sketch of a Bronze Age fetish made of leather or wood, on a sign affixed to its door – I passed by a couple who sat with their hands clasped across the table; I recalled Rachel, with a pang. I went into the lavatory. Narrowing my eyes against the harsh glare of the fluorescent tube in there, which flashed from the white tiles and mirrors, I walked

over to the metal urinal. The acrid perfume of bilious yellow disinfectant cakes failed to mask the sour stench of stale urine. I unzipped my fly, pissed.

After, I was washing my hands in the sink when I heard a bolt being drawn back. Turning, I saw an old man standing in the doorway of a cubicle. My heart scrabbled against my ribs, like a rat against the bars of a cage in which it is trapped – he was one of the mob of elderly fiends who had chased me following the diabolic Punch and Judy show, the man I had seen staving the skull of another of the horde, who had impeded his frantic pursuit. He held my gaze, but there was no recognition in his eyes. I hastened away, rejoined the group.

My hands were trembling, my breaths ragged gasps.

I sat down. Turning to Duncan, I said, trying to control the quaver in my voice, ‘Sorry to keep you waiting. Go ahead.’

‘What’s wrong?’

I told the Scotsman what had passed. He nodded sagely, patted his stump.

‘This missing limb of mine is a constant reminder of what happened to me. Long ago, I learnt to see the good in it. It’s proof, don’t you see, that what I underwent was no delusion. Wouldn’t you rather know yourself sane, but afflicted, than mad? There are other things that tell me that too, as you will hear. Still, it is a dreadful thing to have horrors recalled in such a way. You’re sure you’re alright?’

‘Yes, honestly. Go on with your tale.’

He took a sip of his porter, sat back in his chair, cleared his throat to get the attention of the table.

‘There’s one thing I want to ask of everyone before I begin. The experiences we have all undergone have been strange... unco, like. But there is one aspect of what I’m about to tell that won’t make any sense to you. I’ll explain all at the end, but, please, I’d like you to pledge not to ask me any questions until I’m finished. I just want to tell it to you as it happened, get it straight in my head, and tell it true. Understand?’

Everyone gave their assent.

‘Thank you. Well, I’d better start. I was born in Glasgow, spent my early childhood in a tenement flat in the Gorbals. My family was right poor, real kirk mice. My father worked on the ships, shipbuilding, you know, down on the Clyde, but what he earned wasn’t really enough to keep life and limb together...’

### **A Treatise on Dust**

Therefore, in order to keep his family fed and warm, Duncan's father was forced to steal bread from bins behind bakeries and fill his pockets with lumps of coke intended for smelting furnaces down at the docks. When Duncan was five his mother found work as a maidservant – worn-out clothes and shoes were replaced, and, for a time, the larder was abundantly stocked and, every evening, coals crackled and spat cheerily in the grate. Unfortunately, this period of plenty was short-lived – the mother's employer, a lawyer, came across her alone, below stairs, and propositioned her. She recoiled in horror, spurned the unwelcome advances, was sacked on the spot.

After that, things got rapidly worse. Increasing mechanisation at the docks put Duncan's father's job under threat and the slum landlords raised rents. One day, a few weeks after his ninth birthday, Duncan returned home from the laundry in which he had been put to work, to find the door forced, left hanging off its hinges, and his family butchered. His father – who had been introduced to the writings of Marx and Engels by students who drank in the whisky shop he patronized – had been agitating his fellow workers, advocating a suspension of their labour in protest over conditions. Thugs in the pay of the shipyard owners had broken in – Duncan's parents sprawled in pools of slowly clotting blood in the living-room, skulls battered with pick-handles; his older sister, who had been taking a bath when the murderers broke in, had been brutally raped and drowned in the tin tub; the youngest, only four, lay where she had been sleeping in her cot, smothered with her blanket.

(Looking about me, I realised the rest were as bemused as I. The period in which the butcher's tale was set strained credibility, even for this gathering. Either he was delusional, or unfeasibly old. I realised this was the explanation for his enigmatic preamble – he was pre-

emptying our questions on this point. I burned to quiz him, but felt I should honour my oath, and hear him out first. I resolved to sit back, listen. From their expressions I judged the others were likewise fighting to stifle their curiosity; at least all except Elliot, who, shredding a hank of coarse tobacco on his palm, seemed barely to be listening at all.)

Duncan joined a gang of homeless street urchins who slept in an abandoned hotel, the Great Eastern – a building whose respectable, foursquare exterior concealed a riot of squalid life. The children ran errands for petty criminals and snatched purses on Sauchiehall Street and in George Square.<sup>1</sup> Life was very hard. Many of them were forced into prostitution.

An aptitude for legerdemain provided a means of escape for Duncan. About the time of his sixteenth birthday – he had forgotten the exact date, but knew the month in which he was born – some of the other children clubbed together to buy him a pack of playing cards.

After many weeks of diligent practise his act was good enough to take onto the streets. He set up his stall, a cardboard box draped with an old blanket, on St Enoch Square, next to the colourful tents of the fortune tellers. He rigged games of Blackjack and Find the Lady, fleecing drunks and gullible yokels, in town for market day, and performed sleight-of-hand magic for small change. His income was soon enough to enable him to leave the Great Eastern and pay rent on a tiny bedsit in Maryhill. Then, as his popularity increased, he was able to purchase a booth with a green-and-red-striped awning, and a costume of top hat and tails. By his twenty-third birthday he was a well-known street performer – always surrounded by a throng making fevered and ill-advised bets on the turn of the cards – and was living in relative comfort in the newly prosperous area of Kelvinbridge. He enjoyed many of the pleasures a modicum of wealth could buy, including some that were more or less illicit – opium, gambling, and women.

However, he was astute enough to realise his days as an entertainer would be numbered, that at some time, the novelty worn off, he would no longer draw the crowds. He decided it would be wise to embark upon another career, one in which he would not have to rely on the

approbation of a fickle public. He decided he would become a sham medium, for it was a potentially lucrative trade, interest in the occult being at that time widespread and fervent, for which, an accomplished showman and conjurer, he was well suited. Putting aside some of his earnings, he saved until he had enough to buy the tools of this chosen profession, foremost among which were a spirit cabinet with velvet drapes, which he had specially constructed for him; a mechanism for tilting tables; and a complicated system of pulleys and fishing wire that, in an ill-lit room, would allow him to give the impression certain objects were floating in the air. He had a craftsman, who made props for the theatre, fashion for him a cunning Cartesian devil in the form of a goblin bobbing in a carboy of dusky spirit, blinking its sorrowful eyes.<sup>2</sup>

In his spare time, he practised those skills he thought would prove essential, and which he did not already possess – mimicry, ventriloquism, and escapology, the latter for use in spirit-cabinet channellings.

Most enjoyable of his preparations was that of choosing the spirit guide through whom he would pretend to channel his ghosts. He decided to invoke Jean-Paul Marat, physician turned seditionist and hero of the French Revolution, who had actually visited Scotland in 1774. Marat's death had been appropriately bizarre and brutal – having contracted a virulent skin disease hiding in the sewers of Paris, the torment of which forced him to spend his days lying in a tub, immersed in cool water, and swaddled in soothing, calamine-smeared bandages, he had been defenceless as a new-born babe when his assassin, Charlotte Corday, a Girondist, had called on him, a kitchen knife concealed in her sleeve, on the 13<sup>th</sup> July, 1793.<sup>3</sup> Duncan spent many hours perfecting the nasal accent he would employ.

The extrusion of ectoplasm from the spiritualist's body was, he realised, crucial to creating the séance's atmosphere. He experimented with different substances, rejecting cheesecloth and butter-muslin as unconvincing. Eventually he decided the best solution was to have a vial of Scarab Dust, a sweet effervescent powder sold as a confection for children, concealed in his shirt-cuff, from whence it could be surreptitiously poured into his mouth – he



discovered when he swilled a sufficient quantity of it around with his tongue, it generated a large quantity of pallid froth.

Duncan expected the fact he was known to many as a conjurer to be a hindrance, but belief in spiritualism was so profound in Glaswegian society at the time, that few questioned whether his ability to make contact with the dead was genuine or feigned, or saw any connection between the uncanny things that occurred during his séances and his former occupation. He often began sittings by passing around the Cartesian Devil in its jar, while relating the story he had concocted about it. He claimed that, having come across, in a recondite manuscript authored by Paracelsus, a description of the birthing of a homunculus he had been seized by a desire to attempt to reproduce the Swiss physician's prodigal creation.<sup>4</sup> For this he had required a mandrake's root. Duncan described how, after a long search, he located a patch of these plants growing on the shores of Loch Lomond, in the shadow of an olden yew. He explained that, as mandrakes emit a shriek perilous to humans on being unearthed, the alchemist had urged the precaution of training a dog to dig up the root, advice Duncan had followed, resulting in the death of a terrier pup. Duncan told his enthralled audience how he had then submerged the root in a bucket of mingled milk, honey, and goat's blood, and left it in a warm nook by his fire for several weeks, during which time it transmuted into the creature they saw before them.

Duncan's séances took one of two forms, depending on the circumstances, his assessment of the credulity of the gathering, and his mood. If he was feeling cautious he would make use of the spirit cabinet. He would have the host bind his hands with rope, then enter the cabinet, and have the curtain drawn behind him. Then he could communicate with the spirits out of sight of sceptical eyes. When bolder he would use a rite more calculated to inspire awe, would join his sitters at a table and channel in full view. When he asked all to clasp their neighbours' hands, he was able, by a wile, to keep one of his own free without anyone realising, something easy to achieve in the halfflight. This enabled him to make use of his contraptions

to tip the table, snuff candles, scrape chalk down a slate, and cause ladies' gloves to dance in the air, and also allowed him to sprinkle some of the sherbet from his vial into his mouth.

But it was research that was the real key to the illusion of genuine psychomancy. Duncan paid close attention to the obituary columns and made sure he was well informed about the deceased friends and relatives of those likely to attend his séances.

Duncan's shrewdness and skill at chicanery ensured it was not long before he had risen to a position of eminence among Glasgow's mediums, and was in great demand. His choice of spirit guide also played a part in his success – there was something of a fad for rebellion among the aesthetes and decadents at that time. By that time his lifestyle was one of flagrant debauchery.

But the period of his success was only to last a season. A mere year after quitting his booth on St Enoch Square he conducted his last séance. It was held in the drawing-room of the town residence of a woman of noble lineage, a marchioness. It was one of a number of hulking buildings of reddish stone that crowned a hill in the city's West End, overlooking Kelvingrove Park and, beyond, the pall of smoke that hung over the Clyde Shipyards. Before ringing the bell, Duncan stood looking at this prospect a short time, felt a pang of sorrow over the cruel murders of his family.

On being shown through to the dining room by a fawning butler, Duncan found there were twenty guests at the party that evening. Seven of these had expressed cynicism on the subject of communication with the dead and, on Duncan's arrival, were politely asked, by the marchioness, to absent themselves, move through to the drawing room.

That left thirteen to take part in the channelling: the marchioness herself – a plump dowager, wearing a shapeless floral-print dress, strings of pearls around her neck, her sagging face larded with make-up and powder; Joseph Lister – whose recent innovations in sterile operating conditions were just then earning him the acclaim of the medical community; the inscrutable Mr. Lodge – whose tales of his travels in the Far East and encounters with tattooed

savages had caused a sensation; Douglas Kilbride – a wealthy aristocrat and fanatical collector of antiquities; Lady Alicia Hitchman – a young heiress, whose large brown eyes, set in a face of unparalleled comeliness, had been the cause of many duels between rivals for her affections; Jacob Bridges – a young man who had been discovered ten years earlier in the Trossachs by a pig farmer, apparently feral, gibbering and acting like a wild thing, and who – having been taken in, tamed, and educated by a prominent Glaswegian philanthropist – was at that time prized at dinner parties for his callow, candid observations; Claire Turner – the erudite socialite, whose wit had snared many men and whose intricate web of blackmail would remain unexposed and provide her with a healthy income in her dotage; Alexander ‘Greek’ Thomson – a courteous, slightly deaf, elderly gentleman, a famous architect, whose favouring of the classical style had earned him his sobriquet; Heather MacLellan – widow of a wealthy mine-owner; Allan Pinkerton – the renowned founder of America’s first detective agency, who had returned to Glasgow, the city from which he hailed, for a brief sojourn following the American Civil War, he was a sullen, taciturn man, who wore a full, unkempt beard; Augustus Kellner – poet and petty dissident; a man calling himself John Walker – a friend of Kellner’s, who wore a wig, ill-fitting clothes, and had an alcoholic’s ruddy complexion and tumid nose; and Rebecca Graves – wife of wealthy, liberal advocate Herbert Graves, who had been turned to superstition by the untimely death of her teenage son.<sup>5</sup>

(Upon hearing the description of John Walker, Elliot inexplicably grinned broadly; plumes of pungent pipe smoke seeped from the gaps between his stained teeth.)

The séance began in the customary way with a round of introductions, then Duncan began his patter. He explained the spirits’ reluctance to manifest themselves in bright light and the dangers of touching either the medium – once he has entered his trance – or any ectoplasmic manifestation. Afterwards, he had one of the servants turn the gas lamps low and exhorted the group to clasp hands. After requesting calm, no matter what might occur, he closed his eyes and threw back his head. Ten minutes of tense silence followed, then, at what

he judged the right moment, he began moaning – a low lamentation that mutated into half-formed words in English and French. He opened his lids, stared blankly up at the crystal chandelier hanging from the ceiling – his eyes, rolled back, like pools of albumen set in his face – and began to speak in the heavily accented voice of his guide.

‘It seems that in death, as in life, I am to have no peace. To what purpose have I been called forth today?’

The marchioness answered.

‘We wish to speak with the spirits of departed loved ones.’

‘Is that so? There are a number of souls here who wish to make themselves known.’

‘Yes?’ Rebecca Graves asked, slightly frantic.

‘But why should I offer you salve? I have found no unguent to soothe this infernal itching.’

The persona Duncan had created for his guide was cantankerous – he had realised pliancy would draw suspicion.

‘It would be a great comfort to us, to speak with those souls,’ Heather MacLellan interjected, fighting to keep the imploring note from her tone.

‘Of that I’ve no doubt,’ Duncan replied.

In a way he enjoyed these moments of cruelty. His hard life had left him with little empathy for the rich. These people had always enjoyed every privilege and knew nothing of suffering.

‘Is there anything we can do for you in return?’ the marchioness asked.

This question allowed Duncan to indulge his subversive impulses with impunity.

‘I would ask you to pledge to do what you can to improve the plight of the worker. Many have been cozened into exchanging the fields for the factories, believing a better life was to be had. But, instead of breaking their backs tilling and sowing, they now have their backs broken

for them on the wheels of the dark mills and reap none of the fruits of their labours. They toil for a pittance whilst the owners cavort with Mammon. Beware the industrialist!

‘Beware also your leaders! In the future wars will not be fought nation against nation for political ends, but waged merely to fill the purses of the arms manufacturers, and send the poor to their deaths. Even you, rich as you are, will likely not be spared, for War in the industrial age will no longer be constrained to the battlefield, but will stalk abroad smiting indiscriminately. Only the servile scientists shall be spared, for they have placed their souls in pawn for their lives, have pledged to develop the fell, havocking weapons of which the potentates dream.’<sup>6</sup>

‘Beware the industrialist, beware your leaders, and give to your poor!’

Augustus Kellner sighed.

‘That’s good advice.’

‘Life is unfair. Get over it or kill yourself,’ said Jacob Bridges, in his curiously stilted, lilting intonation.

Putting her hand on the simpleton’s shoulder, the marchioness said, gently, ‘He’s already dead, dear.’

Taking advantage of this diversion, Duncan dredged his tongue with sherbet. As his chin and chest became slavered with spume, he groaned. When he again had everyone’s attention, he began to speak, ‘A spirit demands to communicate with the company. A young man. With a birthmark on his upper-arm in the form of a cross.’

‘Lucas, is that you?’ Rebecca Graves asked, sobbing pitiably.

Duncan modulated his voice, began to speak with an adolescent boy’s cadence.

‘Yes, mother.’

‘Oh son, son. I miss you so much.’

‘I miss you too, mother. Are you well?’

‘Oh Lucas, I wish that I weren’t. I wish I could soon be joining you.’

‘You mustn’t say things like that. We’ll be together when God wills it.’

‘My son, how are you?’

‘Things here are wonderful, mother. So many interesting people to talk to, no more pain.

Do you remember those terrible headaches I used to have?’

‘Yes. Have they gone?’

‘Completely, it’s such a relief.’

‘I’m so glad. Have you seen your grandmother?’

At this point Duncan began to tip the table violently, then said, in his Marat voice:

‘The young man has left us now. But there are other souls crowding in.’

Rebecca Graves wept, hunched over the table.

The séance continued and Duncan ‘channelled’ several further spirits – a former suitor of Lady Alicia Hitchman, killed in a duel; Charles MacLellan, Heather’s dead, plutocrat husband; Douglas Kilbride’s former butler, but recently dead of consumption; and a fictional set of twins, victims of brutal murder, invoked to give an air of authenticity. When he felt it was time to conclude, Duncan caused the tablecloth to float into the air with a device he operated with his knee, screamed, sat upright in his chair, then cried out in terror for the lamps to be turned up full.

The participants filed through to the drawing room, which was redolent of coffee, vintage port, and fragrant cigars, to join the sceptics. A conversation about spiritualism was struck up. After an hour, Walker, by then very drunk, perched on the arm of the chair Duncan sat in. Raising his glass and looking about the room, he proposed a toast to the medium, which some of the other guests joined him in, then, leaning close, whispered conspiratorially, ‘Impressive stuff, I must say. You had them eating out of your hand.’

Duncan’s rejoinder was weak, ‘It’s the spirit-world that deserves the credit, I’m merely a conduit.’

‘Don’t worry, I don’t intend to expose you. It’s an artful hoax and you have my admiration. I was only wondering whether you would be interested to see real evidence of the uncanny, proof there are more things in heaven and earth, so to speak.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘And if the prospect of having the scales plucked from your eyes, of joining an elect band who has glimpsed the truth the quotidian veils does not strike you as its own reward, I have also discovered wealth for the taking. If you’re curious, meet me tomorrow at midnight, outside the Necropolis’s main entrance.’

The marchioness interrupted their murmured conversation, before Duncan could ask any further questions of the rum Walker.

‘Mr. Walker, you appear to be monopolising our guest. I’m sure everybody would like the opportunity to question him about his extraordinary gift.’

The Necropolis. Though conceived as a glorious tribute to the city’s esteemed dead, it had, by that time – less than half a century after its inauguration – already fallen into neglect. Its sward was strewn with empty liquor bottles; its bounds were encroached upon by slum tenements; and its monuments scarred by scratched graffiti. It was, in itself, innocuous enough, but the hill on which it was sited had, in times long past, seen tumult and wickedness, was cankered, was a welter of history, myth, and rottenness.<sup>7</sup>

Duncan, innocent of this, was fond of the silence that prevailed in the boneyard, thinking it a peaceful quiet, not realising it was sinister, gravid; he had often visited it during the time he had been living in filth in the Great Eastern Hotel and knew many of its occupants’ stories.<sup>8</sup> Waiting by the gate he shuddered on sighting the Hotel a little distance off. Lambent orange and red, lit from within by the fires of its occupants, it seemed a rough-hewn jack-o’-lantern.

The night was cold and bright, though a fog wreathed the cemetery. The dour statue of John Knox – elevated above the mist by the column on which it stood – was silhouetted against a moon cut like a sickle.<sup>9</sup> The reformer surveyed the city beneath him with disdain, a bible, from which he appeared to be declaiming, in his hand.

From the wrought iron gate at which Duncan waited, the Necropolis was reached by crossing a bridge known as the Bridge of Sighs; its masonry was starred with lichen, and its cobbles worn by the tramp of mourners' feet.

The appointed hour passed, there was no sign of the strange Mr Walker. Growing impatient, Duncan began walking back and forth. To the north Glasgow Cathedral loomed through the mist, its stonework blackened by the miasmas poured forth by the smokestacks of the cities factories. Once, three years before, Duncan had entered the Cathedral's cavernous interior and descended the stairs to the lower church where there was a tomb dedicated to Saint Kentigern, also known as Mungo, founder of Glasgow. There he had perused a plaque which gave an account of one of Mungo's famous miracles; at the time he had been teaching himself to read and had taken all opportunities to practise. The text on the panel told how an adulterous queen, Longoureth, had presented to a young lover a ring that had been given to her by her husband, Rhydderch Hael. The king had been told about the affair by a servant, but, at first, uxorious, trusting in his wife's faithfulness, refused to believe his informant. However, when he saw the band on the lover's finger, he realised his retainer had been truthful and was consumed with jealousy. He conceived a plot to force his wife to admit her infidelity. On a hunting trip with his rival, he got the younger man drunk, took the ring from his finger and threw it in the Clyde. On his return he demanded his wife present the ring to him; when she failed to do so he publicly denounced and incarcerated her. While in prison, Longoureth managed to persuade one of her warders, who was infatuated with her, to get a message to Bishop Mungo, pleading for forgiveness and requesting his aid. The man of God directed the besotted guard to go fishing in the Clyde and to return with his first catch. When



the warder reeled in his line there was a sleek, pink-bellied salmon jerking on the end of it. Mungo slit this fish open from gills to gut. In its stomach was a small crab, still living, and the missing ring. It was returned to Longoureth who presented it to her mystified husband. King Rhydderch had no choice other than to publicly forgive his licentious wife and offer repentance for his accusation of her.<sup>10</sup> What had chiefly struck Duncan was how easily Kentigern's 'miracle' might have been accomplished by deceit and sleight of hand.

While Duncan paced, Walker emerged from the brume enshrouding the graveyard and came capering along the Bridge of Sighs towards the gate, dressed in motley and grinning obscenely, his wig askew.

'I'm so glad you've come,' he said, his speech slurred.

Duncan suddenly realised the absurdity of the situation; the man was a soused buffoon. There were no riches to be had, no revelations.

'Sorry. It was a mistake. I think I'd better go.'

'Nonsense. Don't get cold feet on me. You probably just need a drink.'

Walker held out a silver hip-flask. Shrugging, Duncan took it and sniffed its contents. Cognac, good quality too. He tilted his head back and took a swig. Swilling the liquid around his mouth, he savoured its sweet richness before swallowing it.

'So, will you come with me?' Walker asked.

'What is it you want to show me?' Duncan asked.

'Did you know that the knoll on which the Necropolis stands,' here Walker gestured languidly behind him, 'is riddled with tunnels?'

'I've heard that that was the original intention of those who built it. They never carried out their plans, though.'

'Yes, they did. It is not widely known, but when the Necropolis was first opened there were entrances to the catacombs all over the graveyard.<sup>11</sup> They were sealed up, for reasons I will explain. I've managed to locate one, and re-open it.'

‘What is to be found down there?’

‘Extensive vaults littered with valuable objects. Before the tunnels were closed, a number of the city’s great and good were buried beneath the knoll, some of them inhumed amid opulence, their crypts filled with luxuries to provide comfort on their journeys to the next life, for all the world like Pharaohs, as if the pull of pagan, atavistic rites was too strong, and at the last they abandoned their religious scruples.’

‘I see,’ Duncan said. He remained sceptical, but his avarice had been kindled. It was just possible the drunk had discovered some artefacts of great worth, and should he have done, he was so feckless he could doubtless be easily gulled out of his share of them.

‘Very well. I’ll come with you.’

‘First I must warn you, the place is, by all accounts, horror-ridden. It is said that during its excavation, miners, digging with picks by the feeble light of oil lamps, broke through into a region honeycombed with pre-existing tunnels. A crew of six men was sent down to explore it. None of this detail were seen again, bar one, who emerged blinking into the sunlight several hours after they had gone below ground, his hair turned white as a drift of fresh snow. Struck mute as a stone by terror, and also poorly educated, illiterate, unable to write, this man could not relate what had befallen the others, though it was assumed by the foreman they had had some accident, blundered into a pit, perhaps. However, because none of the labourers could be coerced into entering the warren into which they had disappeared, believing it cursed, no rescue party went searching for them. That part of the catacombs was blocked off, and the incident forgotten by all but a few. Some of those who do still recall it insist the passageways the unfortunate men were sent to map were not natural tunnels, but some outerlying ways of the regions of Agartha, those primeval borings that are said to riddle the earth. They claim that by entering them the missing party crossed a bourn into the realm of the Old Ones, and were duly punished for their trespass.’

‘I don’t know what to believe myself, though I know in the early days, when the catacombs were in use, there were reports of knockers tormenting workers and moving props. Then there was a cave-in in which five men who had been taking a councillor to his final resting place were killed. That was when the tunnels were abandoned all together. I, myself, have heard scuffling and faint wordless muttering down there, and felt, at times, as if some thing were stalking me. I tell you all this to assuage my conscience, and to appraise you that we may be in danger, though I feel sure you are a brave man, and will not be discouraged. Still, here is your opportunity to wash your hands of this venture.’<sup>12</sup>

Walker folded his arms across his chest, stood facing the Necropolis, but regarding Duncan slyly, askance.

Duncan rubbed his hands together, partly to warm them, partly in anticipation of the riches that might soon be his. He esteemed Walker’s talk of the missing workers, the Old Ones, and Agartha the ramblings of a sot.

‘No, no. I’m undeterred.’

Walker grinned.

‘Good. I’m glad. Follow me.’

He turned, lurched away, Duncan close on his heels. The two men crossed the bridge, the Molendinar Burn running beneath. Though the trees in the cemetery had shed their leaves, grass and rampant ivy, well-watered by the recent rains, garbed the graveyard in green raiment. Taking a track that climbed the hillside obliquely, the two men first passed, on their right, a squat, ugly monument which commemorated the life of the physicist William Thomson, then, a little further on, a sculpture of war hero Lieutenant-Colonel Alexander Hope Pattison clad in military uniform and cloak. The Lieutenant-Colonel had died in Nassau, New Providence, in 1843. The right arm of the effigy had been broken off at shoulder and wrist, the severed hand nestled grotesquely in a fob pocket. Situated nearby was the cenotaph of the Lieutenant-Colonel’s brother, the anatomist Granville Sharp Pattison; a rogue who

always kept a loaded brace of antique dragoons' pistols on his desk in case of trouble; who, in order to ensure a fresh supply of cadavers for his dissection table, had, in his youth, consorted with Glasgow's resurrection men, was even indicted for body snatching, though a not-proven verdict was given. He was forced to flee to the US in 1816 after an affair with a colleague's wife became public knowledge, lived dissolute in Philadelphia a few months, before moving to Baltimore where he was known for toying and brawling. In 1822 he returned to Britain to take up a post at London University, but the poor quality of his teaching soon led to student accusations of incompetence and rioting. He was sacked. After this he sailed across the Atlantic for the last time, spent a while living in a doss house in Atlantic City, playing the pipes on the boardwalk for small change. Then his fortunes were revived when a former colleague spotted him and found him work at a University in New York – he lived out his final years as an anatomy lecturer known and beloved for his flamboyance.

Duncan and Walker followed a miry path that branched off to the left, towards the crest of the mound, passing an ancient oak, bark scored by the blades of adolescents' pocket-knives, rows of stones, obelisks, and Celtic crosses, and a fresh dug grave, oval heap of delved soil to one side of the pit, two shovel handles jutting from it. At the top of the ascent Duncan turned and looked down on the sprawl. Here and there a few lights glimmered in the nefarious quarters, but it seemed most of the city's inhabitants were tucked up in their beds. Near at hand there was an ostentatious mausoleum, its design modelled on a Templar church. A drinking school huddled around a fire under its porch, passing a bottle of cheap whisky between them. Duncan knew the fortune which had built that opulent sepulchre had been obtained by deceit. The man for whom it had been constructed, a Major Monteath, had been an officer in the East India Company – a man of limited means. Then one day, while watching a Maharajah's procession, he had chased after and recovered a stampeding elephant. The animal had had a howdah on its back containing a casket of precious stones. Monteath

claimed this had been lost, fallen into a river, but, when he returned to Glasgow from the subcontinent, he entered the city's high society, an inexplicably wealthy man.

Walker and Duncan continued their ascent. A shaft of moonlight, shining obliquely down, illuminated a bizarre monument sculpted in the form of a proscenium arch stage. This had been erected in honour of John Henry Alexander, a renowned theatrical entrepreneur, who had died of shock after being told how a hocus cry of fire at one of his playhouses had kindled a panic during which sixty-five people were crushed to death. Duncan knew him as the inventor of the famous Great Gun Trick, in which a fearless conjurer catches a bullet in his teeth.

Passing by the pillar on which the pious stylite Knox stood, the two men were startled when a fawn darted by. Beyond the column lay two sepulchres next to each other. The nearest was squat and plain, and had alcoves on either side, holding statues – on the left, the Virgin, cradling the infant Christ, and, on the right, Mary Magdalene. Inside, behind an iron gate, Duncan glimpsed a sculpture of a woman wearing a crown, flanked by angels at prayer.

It was to the further tomb Walker led Duncan. It was of Moorish design, octagonal, with a domed roof; inside were interned the bones of William Rae Wilson, an early travel writer. Walker, producing a key, unlocked the padlock securing the entrance, then pushed the gate open. Its hinges gave out a rusty wail. Three cartouches adorned the interior walls; as they were water-stained, their inscriptions were difficult to decipher, though Duncan could just make out the abstruse phrase: 'Thy Saints take pleasure in her stones and favour the dust thereof.'

The mausoleum floor was strewn with the paraphernalia of opium eaters and adolescent louts – empty glass phials, lewd lithographs, and bottles that had once held strong, cheap liquors. Sweeping this dross aside, Walker revealed a trapdoor.

He lifted the hatch. It fell open with a crash. He produced an oil lantern, lit the wick with a match, and directed its light down into the gloom. By its faint glimmer Duncan saw the

rungs of a rusty iron ladder. Then Walker spoke, the first words that had passed between the two men since their meeting at the gate.

‘We’re going to need another snifter,’ he said, indicating the flask poking from his jacket pocket. ‘To steady our nerves before we go down.’

Duncan drank gratefully when the brandy was passed to him. Though he was not usually the fearful kind, the atmosphere of the nocturnal graveyard had unsettled him, and the fetor rising from the shaft routed his mettle. The idea the catacombs were stalked by foul olden entities no longer seemed so absurd.

‘I’ve changed my mind. I don’t want to go through with this.’

Walker threw out his hand, seized Duncan’s wrist in his bony grasp.

‘Are you a coward?’ he hissed.

‘No.’

Loosing his grip, the drunk was jovial again.

‘Well, in that case, let’s go.’

The two men climbed down into the pit, Walker in the lead. Reaching the foot of the ladder, he went on down a low dank tunnel. Duncan slid down the last stretch of the ladder, ran to catch him up. Cavorting insanely, his mouth fixed in a ludic grimace, the drunk pointed out tombs of particular interest, like an antic tour guide. There was no sign of the promised treasures, but Walker led Duncan deeper into the borings, explaining the upper-levels had already been pillaged, and that, in any case, the most costly artefacts were to be found in the crypts furthest below the surface. The high, cloying stench of decay choked Duncan, and he was forced to cover his mouth and nose with his handkerchief. It was warm and close, and soon he was perspiring heavily. He paused to take off his heavy overcoat. When he looked up again, Walker had vanished and with him the only source of illumination. Duncan called out – calmly at first, then with increasing desperation – but received no response. Alone in the pitch, he quailed, then, the jaws of panic closing around his throat, took flight. His bootsoles

fell upon objects strewn on the floor, whose nature he was loath to hazard. Some of these things snapped beneath his weight, like brittle twigs, others gave forth a stench as his feet sank into them.<sup>13</sup> Filmy spiders' webs soon shrouded his head, and sharp outcroppings of rock struck out at him; one blow laid open his brow, and blood poured into his eyes.<sup>14</sup>

After he had been running for what seemed a very long time, dread bloating the minutes to days, he lost his footing, tripped, and slid down a long, steeply inclined tunnel, coming to rest upon a pile of bones. When his eyes adjusted to the murk he found himself in a vast cavern, dimly lit by the faint glow of a pool of phosphorescent fluid.

His ankle hurt badly. He tentatively explored the joint with his hands. Though it was twisted and swelling, it was not broken. He got to his feet. Uninjured, it would have been difficult for him to climb the slope he had tumbled down; the sprain prohibited him from even attempting to do so. He looked around for some other exit, began cautiously to cross the uneven floor. Then the light failed, and all was pitchy.

Duncan stood still wondering what best to do. Then he became aware of a hideous gibbering swelling about him. His guts unravelled.

'Who's there?' he cried.

Waxing, the babble became a howl. Duncan sensed dread things pressing in on him, heard scrabbling and a low whickering in the darkness. Terror threw its arms around his chest – it felt as if bands of iron girded his ribs. He began walking slowly forward, his right arm outstretched to feel his way. Then his hand struck greasy flesh, slipped off, brushed a scabrous hide. Keen talons clutched at it. He crouched, loosed a thin stream of bile from the corner of his mouth, got to his feet, ran blind and wild.

Of his escape from the tunnels, Duncan remembered little – noxious odours, narrow passageways teeming with mewling hordes of black rats, glimpses of mouldering corpses and grinning skeletons, torn fragments of manuscript scattered underfoot, and a chasm giving onto an abyss.

He emerged into the wan moonlight from a mausoleum at the foot of the hill, almost careering into a granite monument, a memorial to nineteen firemen who perished when the blazing whisky bond they were dousing had exploded. His clothes were filthy and tattered. Walker sat calmly on a gravestone nearby, swinging his feet, drinking from his hipflask.

‘Where did you go?’ he asked, winking.

Duncan hurled himself at the sot, fists flailing, but his right arm felt dull, leaden, as if corrupted by its contact with the vile creatures beneath the earth. Walker snickered. Duncan turned and fled.

Over the next few days his arm grew more enfeebled, took on a necrotic hue, and began to stink of rotteness. He was eventually forced to seek medical counsel. The surgeon advised the only course was amputation, surmising some form of blood poisoning responsible for the putrefaction. The operation was duly performed, then Duncan returned to his flat, gathered together a few of his possessions, and went down to the docks. He sought a ship sailing for North America that would be prepared to hire him on, cripple though he was – perhaps a vessel that needed to cast off urgently, or one engaged in an illicit trade. Fate, hitherto so cruel to him, smiled upon him that day, for it was not long before he found a craft that would have him, a tea clipper whose captain was in a great hurry to be under way.



## IX

I have been writing in a frenzy, but distractedly – listening attentively for footfalls, nose twitching to scent the reek of pipesmoke. At any moment, I expect the locked door of this chamber to be forced.

A lone blowfly listlessly circles the dim lightbulb, on occasion blundering into it and singeing its wings.

We have been without food for several days, and shared the last of our water yesterday morning. My stomach is a knuckled fist, my mouth an ash-pit, but the tribeswoman looks far worse – she lies stretched out on a pallet improvised from our outer garments – it is warm down here and we have no need of them – pale and gaunt, her lips cracked, her tongue black and swollen, for some time now too feeble to act as my scrivener. It is terrible to see her like that, and to know it is entirely my fault. I think it unlikely she will last much longer before perishing of thirst; I suppose, in a way, I envy her. I would rather die like that than in the dread manner cruel Providence has destined I shall.

My fate is sure; when it will come is not – it is my fervent hope I am granted time to finish my narrative, to bring my tale to a meet conclusion. However, I weary of the central strand of my story for the time being, and, try as I might, cannot force myself to continue with it. So, for respite, I will now describe, the tribeswoman's and my exploration of the Ark's hold, something I promised to do, in any case.

If you recall, when the tribeswoman and I found ourselves at the foot of the Ark's companion stairs, having been forced to take refuge from the natives' bombardment below decks, I switched on my electric torch and we saw we stood at one end of a long narrow passageway.

This corridor had walls of riveted steel plates, sheets of rubber matting laid on the floor, and a low ceiling along which a number of conduits and bundles of cables ran. Though the atmosphere was stale, draughts issuing from grilles set at intervals in a duct overhead stirred the dust hanging in the air, and the motes eddied in the beam of torchlight – the ship's long dormant air conditioning had been activated by the opening of the companion hatch. The girl and I set off down the corridor. We soon came to a junction, an intersection with another passage. Weary, we decided to stop and rest there a moment. We sat down and slumped against the wall. I left the torch on, determined we should not succumb to tiredness, but, despite this, perhaps drowsed by the stuffiness, we both soon fell asleep.

I know not how long we slumbered. On waking, I found the tribeswoman snoring lightly, her head upon my shoulder. I roused her by shaking her gently, and we continued along the tunnel.

Then I turned a corner, stepped upon something yielding, pinguid. As I drew my foot back in horror, a foul smell rose to my nostrils, and I gagged.<sup>1</sup> Shining the torch at the floor, I saw a mouldy, flyblown hock of ham, sitting in a puddle of brown slop. I was perplexed a moment, then realised the vessel's hold must have been sealed when it sank or ran aground, and remained so until the companion hatch was opened. This had retarded the meat's corruption. With the ventilation system working for the first time in millennia, bacteria and flies had been admitted and circulated, and decay had proceeded apace.

The ham had been rank, but continuing we became aware of a stench far worse. Though we quailed at what we might find, still we went on, little knowing what else to do. After a little while we became aware of a low droning coming from up ahead.

Both the odour and noise waxed with every passing step. Then we saw a steel door some distance off. I walked up to it, swallowing the fear that rose in my throat, turned its handle, eased it back on its hinges. The girl joined me on the threshold, and I shone the torch through the opening. By its beam we could make out a small cabin, chockfilled with a dense cloud of

iridescent blowflies that moiled and thrummed. Affixed to the walls, there were a number of berths - in each lay sprawled a rotten, maggoty cadaver. The sight of all that human carrion was enough to congeal the blood.

Retching, the tribeswoman turned away. I slammed the door, and we fled back the way we had come. On reaching the junction, we paused – hunched, hands on knees – to get our breath back, then set off down one of the cross tunnels.

Wretched, we wandered haphazard the dismal ravelled guts of the freighter for a long time. The passageways were choked with the corpses of men and women: many that had apparently succumbed, panicked and agonised, to a fell contagion that raised swellings on the body and caused bleeding from the eyes; and some that had died from frenzied wounds, whether inflicted by their own, or another's hand, it was impossible to tell. From time to time we passed by alcoves containing strange devices. Some looked like misbegotten creatures from the deepest abysses of the oceans tangled in nets of fine copper wire; others, serried banks of nacre nautili; others still, granite menhirs or dolmen. They yammered and twittered; these sounds had the air of pleas, provocations, insinuations, imprecations.<sup>2</sup>

We crossed a cavernous chamber on an iron gantry suspended high in the air, a monstrous engine beneath – beset with bile-green electrical components and bristling with wires and tubing, it looked like the partially decomposed carcass of some hideous behemoth – and passed through a vast stowage, proceeding charily lest the piles of crates beetling over our heads toppled – less because we feared being crushed than because the idea of those boxes breaking open and revealing their contents filled us with terror.

Finally – as I have written – our torch failing, we discovered this office. And here we remain, mouldering, in the glow thrown by its dim bulb, the light and the chirr of the generator palladia against the maddening, oppressive darkness and silence without.

## X

The shocked silence that fell upon the gathering following the last words of Duncan's tale, was broken by the landlord of the Nightingale tolling the bell for last orders. William got to his feet, went up to the bar, and returned with a round of malts and an earthenware jug of water on a tray. The butcher swallowed the spirit set before him at one draught.

'Cheers,' he said, nodding at William, his voice hoarse with the whisky's burn. 'That was kind, I needed that.'

I trickled a dash of the water into my Scotch, then sipped it; its peaty savour was a balm.

'Duncan,' I asked, 'how old are you?'

'I don't right know how to answer that question. You see, I was born over a hundred and fifty years ago, but haven't aged a day since that terrible night in the catacombs.'

After a moment he qualified, 'In body, anyhow. In spirit I'm as weary as you might suppose.'

William glared at him.

'You swear? You're not lying?'

'No,' Duncan said, solemnly. 'I am not. It's true.'

'Jesus,' William muttered, then lit a cigarette. His hands were shaking.

Claire turned to him.

'Can I scrounge a smoke?'

'Sure.'

He offered the packet to her. Once she had the cigarette alight, she took two long draws on it, then asked Duncan how he had spent his long life.

The butcher sat back in his chair, cradling his stump in his left hand, his arm across his chest.

‘Well,’ he began, ‘after crossing the Atlantic, I settled in Boston. I struggled to find a way to earn my keep, for with only one arm, I could no longer perform sleight-of-hand magic, and was obviously unfitted for most manual trades. At first I had to rely on charity, but then found employment in a shambles, an unpleasant job few were willing to do. I worked there for several years. It was during this time I learned about meat.’

Here Duncan paused, and made a chopping motion with his hand.

‘But, one winter, I was robbed by a pickpocket and lost a week’s wages. Alms were not then, for some reason, as forthcoming as they had been when I first arrived in the city, and famishing, I attempted to steal a side of pork. I was caught, lost my job. After that I managed to get by for several years working as a shill to a grifter who had a card-sharping swindle. I was useful to him for I could teach him the tricks I knew, even though I could not perform them myself. What’s more, people seemed to take for granted the honesty of a one-armed man. But after arrest, and a spell in a labour camp, I gave that life up.’

William, Claire, Jane, and I sat listening attentively to Duncan’s narrative. Elliot, however, apparently paid scant attention; he smoked his pipe and stared down at his drink. Something in his attitude then was familiar, but I could not place it.

‘After being released,’ Duncan continued, ‘I travelled to Colorado to see if I could get myself hired on at a mine, but none would have me. I then spent some years stravaiging about the Old West, but I hated the relentless brutality of Frontier life, and eventually headed back east. I wound up in New York. Several terrible years followed. I was sleeping rough in doorways and beneath railway arches, begging and stealing what I could to keep my hunger at bay. But, though I suffered dreadfully, I lived – it seemed I was unnaturally hardy.

‘One night I was set upon by a drunken mob. An aged priest found me bleeding in a gutter, took me, in and tended me. Before long I was fully recovered. I repaid the minister’s

kindness by staying with him and aiding him with those tasks for which he had grown too weak. When he died, a few years later, it was only natural I take over his flock. I was happy for a while. I fell in love with a member of the congregation, a beautiful girl who returned my affections, and we were married. Then, two years later, she died in childbirth. The baby itself was stillborn. The midwife wouldn't let me see it. She would not tell me why, but I believe it was hideously deformed. I was distraught, spent some months alternating long drinking bouts with days sunk in despondency when I would remain in my bed.

‘Eventually I threw off this black mood. It was the time of the Klondike Gold Rush, and hearing of the miners’ hardships, I went out to the Yukon, to wander those frozen lands, offering succour where I could, hoping preaching and ministering to those in need would help me bury my grief.

‘By the way, you may be wondering how, given everything, I’d retained my faith. You must remember that back then religious conviction was much more widespread. I believed my trials had been sent me by God as a punishment for my dissipated lifestyle, thought I could atone for my sins by evangelizing, declaring the true faith, making myself a vehicle for God’s message. I’m ashamed now to recall the pious bollocks I spouted in those days.

‘I spent some years as an itinerant priest in Alaska and Canada. Met many fascinating folks during that time, stampeders, that’s what we called gold rush prospectors back then, seeing as how they acted like spooked cattle, Indians, sorry, Native Americans, poets and writers, and rum fellows, as had wayward and cruel habits, who lived as if they were beyond the law’s reach, which I suppose they were, man’s law anyhow.

‘But dejection returned to me. My soul was sunk in the pits. Disheartened utterly, I overcame pious scruples, cast myself into a ravine about a hundred miles east of Juneau. Striking the scree at the foot of the bluff, I jounced and gyred.

‘When I came to rest, I found I couldn’t stir my carcass. I believe that not one of my bones remained unbroken. Glancing down, I saw the skin had been flayed from my flesh in

patches. Most grisly of all, my belly had burst when I hit, my entrails had spilled out and become wrapped about me as I tumbled. But still my weird life went on.'

Duncan paused, supped at his beer.

'I lay for two days in that sun-shunned place, in agony the while, as the unnatural healing of my body took place, as my bones knit, and skin regrew.'

He shuddered.

'Watching my guts slither speedily back inside fair gave me the horrors. Afterwards, though, I had cause to be glad that this happened so quickly. On the second day, a lone coyote came snuffling round. I dread to think of the torment I might have suffered had he got his teeth into my innards!'

Making his hand into a canine maw, Duncan snapped at the air, grinned.

'When strong enough, I headed for the nearest settlement, crawling part of the way, stumbling the rest. When I reached that town, the name of it escapes me, I holed up in a cheap hotel room for a week. At the end of that time I was hale once more.'

Raising his hand to his mouth, Duncan blew a fanfare through his fist.

'Step right up,' he said, mimicking a carnival barker. 'Step right up and witness the amazing, invincible Scotsman! Hurt him and his wounds will heal themselves before your very eyes!'

Duncan paused, drew breath, grew serious once more.

'Lying in that darkened hotel room I spent a lot of time thinking about Glasgow. I pined for the town of my birth. When recovered, I returned east to New York and secured a berth on a ship bound for that fair city, paying for the trip with some gold I had panned from frigid streams. That was in 1909. I have remained in Scotland ever since.'<sup>1</sup>

Duncan, who had been leaning forward, elbow on the table, as he told his story, sat back in his chair.

'Have you ever seen that man John Walker again?' I asked.

‘No. On my return to Glasgow from the US, I spent the first few years searching for him. But I’ve never seen him again. I’ve never been back inside the Necropolis either. Even to see it from a distance raises a shudder.’

At that moment Elliot laid down his pipe in an ashtray, began trembling. At first, concerned, I thought he was having a fit of some kind. Then I realised he was shaking with silent mirth. Catching sight of me peering at him, he snickered. Duncan turned, glared angrily at him.

‘What?’

Elliot composed himself, wiped his eyes, and took his briar up again.

‘Duncan,’ he said, fondly. ‘You were my first success.’

We all stared at him, bemused.

‘It’s no easy matter to lure someone over the border between this world and that other place, that black hinterland. Most are blinkered, compassed by the everyday, whose course they inscribe, to which they lean and hearken.<sup>2</sup> And, should the right subject be found, it is too easy to entice them in too far, to where they cannot return from, especially if some part of them is pledged to darkness. Others, of course, will die of fright, or be maddened. It has been my experience that very few are able to sojourn in those dread regions and return not too violently altered.’

The rest of us sat apprehensive, yet silent, listening to Elliot; sensing some terrible revelation to come, but unable to form any notion of what it might be.

‘You are a curious incurious lot,’ Elliot jested, fleeing. ‘Though actually, of course, in your case,’ he gestured at me with his the stem of his pipe, ‘inquisitiveness was your undoing. The rest of you were merely unfortunate, could hardly have evaded the toils I set for you. Ah, but I’m forgetting you, Duncan, avarice was your downfall. But how to goad you all now? I know.’



So saying, he once more set down his pipe and sat back in his chair. Casting a glance about I noticed that, although there were still a few drinkers in the public bar, we were alone in the saloon, even the rowdy birthday party had moved on. A low moan drew my attention back to Elliot. The flesh of his face boiled, as if stirred by a myriad writhing life beneath the skin. Then his features resolved themselves, in sequence, into those of the old man who had spoken enigmatically to me on two occasions of wolves; a young man with a harelip; a hoary ancient, cheeks and forehead begrimed, full matted beard, clouded, sightless eyes; an elderly woman with a fleshy face, piggy eyes, and a haughty air; and an old man, with a kindly mien, red raw skin stretched tight over his skull, and lank thinning grey hair, which was dredged with white flakes of shed skin as if he had just come inside out of a flurry of snow. Then the pulp weltered a last time, and Elliot sat before us once more, albeit slightly changed – his eyes deeper set and lit with a baleful fire, teeth sharper, ears pointed, jaw prognathous, and complexion the grey hue of the skin of spoilt fish.

Jane opened her mouth to scream, but no sound issued from her lips. The rest of us sat listless – resigned to our fate.

Elliot went on. His tone veered between hectoring and gleeful.

‘Now I have your full attention, I will introduce myself. I am a scion of a diresome house. Maybe. Or perhaps I was a scholar who, prodigiously learned, but in worldly things callow, rashly made a deal with an emissary of Satan. Or perchance I was not cozened into that pact, but submitted to it voluntarily, a diabolist who chanted some incantation from an age-yellowed grimoire while standing within a pentagram chalked on the floor. Or it’s conceivable I’m entirely innocent, that I am what I am because the hour of my birth saw a conjunction of powerful celestial bodies. Or possibly I am not the victim, willing or not, of dark forces, but was cursed by good for my evil actions. Maybe I am, in truth, the Errant Jew, condemned to maunder and moulder till the Last Judgement for chiding Christ for loitering as he wended his way, bowed beneath his burden, to that knoll known as the Place of the Skull.

Or it might even be I am he who was the first farmer and the first murderer, who was execrated, condemned to wander the earth for all time, who, should he attempt to cultivate the land again, will find his tillage turns fertile soil to fruitless dust, and whom no man may kill on pain of suffering vengeance seven times over. Yes that is a feasible notion, though there is no trace of a mark on me, not a mole, birthmark, or liver-spot whose shape could be construed as significant. So I've really no idea. Forgot long ago. It's hardly important.'

Elliot drew breath. William flicked the end of a cigarette smoked almost down to the filter at his face. Darting out a long tongue from the corner of his mouth, he wrapped it round the butt in mid air, drew it quickly back into his mouth, then resumed speaking as if nothing had happened, the strange and now solemn accents of his voice rolling slowly on his auditors' ears like peals of distant thunder.<sup>3</sup> William reached into his pack for another cigarette, his hand trembling as he did so.

'What is important is I have been cursed, though perhaps I received it as a sought after boon, with life without cease. It is a terrible anguish, something no ordinary man, oppressed by the certainty of death, could understand. For me, it would be rapture to know the rattle in the throat which heralds the end.

'Of course, at first I might well have revelled in my condition. I can recall that period only murkily, for it is many ages ago, but I seem to remember I devoted myself then to rare evil, unthinkable debauchery, and cruelty. Thinking on that, maybe it is most likely, after all, I am a son of perdition, granted immortality by some Potentate of Shadow in exchange for a pledge to go through the world corrupting and bringing low. If, however, that is the case, the enemy of souls has long since lost interest in my deeds. It is possible, though, my malevolence was born merely of perversity.

'How long I pursued that unspeakable path I cannot say, but at some point, perhaps as an act of rebellion, but more probably simply because I became bored of misdeeds, I turned to benevolence. This also, I discovered, did not satisfy my yearning for sensation, for just as I

hadn't felt remorse, or the pricks of conscience, I knew no pleasure in kindness. I knew my term would be endless and felt any deed of mine, good or ill, was as nothing in the balance sheet of eternal life, that, just as in games of chance the outcomes tend toward equilibrium, so my actions, foul or fair, were cancelled out by the conduct of my past and future selves, over which I felt I had no influence.<sup>4</sup>

'I began seeking out other diversions to palliate the appalling tedium of life everlasting. At some time during the years of relative ignorance in Europe that followed the Classical period, I learnt, from an ancient forbidden book, of places where this world abuts another, one dark and uncanny. The writer of the weird volume wrote of certain unfortunates, of whom he had heard tell, who had strayed across the threshold at one of the liminal sites, and wandered eldritch tracts lost and forlorn for many years before finding their way back to the mundane sphere once more. Many of these men were maddened, those who remained sane told of terrors beyond imagining.

'I was seized by a desire to explore that dread realm. After searching for many decades, I located an entrance to it. It is an awful place. The worst thing about it is that it is never the same twice. Sometimes it is lurid, grotesque, sometimes seemingly ordinary, but seething with menace. It is known by many names here on earth, many of which will be familiar to you. I have only ever heard its denizens use but one word for it, a drawn out guttural sound I cannot replicate. I call it Tartarus. You,' he glared at each of us in turn, 'have but glimpsed its horrors. I abhor it, but have been compelled by some twisted part of me that seeks sensation and worse, to spend longer and longer there with each passing year. For at least three centuries now, I have spent more time in its umbral regions than in this world of light.

'Then, when the Enlightenment was a waxing glimmer on the horizon, I made a strange discovery. I was in southern Ireland, and, having grown bored of the tiresome attentions of a young woman I had seduced and brought to ruin, I thought to escape her by throwing myself into a dry well, where I knew, concealed beneath the sand at its foot, there was an entrance to

Tartarus. The girl leapt in after me and followed me across the threshold. Terrified, she fled from me into the gloom, wailing. I ran after her, and, though she was fleet, eventually managed to lay hold of her and drag her back to the domain of the quotidian. It was too late, what she had seen had deprived her of her sanity. I abandoned her.

‘On returning to that country, over a hundred years later, I discovered the girl had become a local bugbear, a banshee that haunted a bleak tract of moorland, whose appearance was thought an omen of death. It was said she never aged, and could not be killed, that she had survived a farmer firing a blunderbuss at her at point-blank range. I realised, when I heard these rumours the girl had become, as a consequence of her sojourn in Tartarus, deathless. Then I got it into my head to try whether I could do what mortals apparently could not, bring death to her. I sought her out. She was living in a cave, seemingly subsisting on the little nourishment that could be found on the barren heath, and looked much the same as when I had last laid eyes on her. She was deranged, naked, her hair tousled and wild. I caught her and throttled her, but she would not die. I unsheathed the dirk I carried about with me in those times, and gored her with it, but, though blood welled forth, she lived on.

‘Frustrated by my inability to kill the young woman, I sought out the nearest entrance to Tartarus, and passed through. I then roamed there for several years. Many times I was tempted to give up, but persevered, feeling obscurely the laws of the place were such that, were my intentions black enough, I would find the thing I sought in the end.

‘This proved true. I came across it in a fane consecrated to dire rites, lying between two candles of black wax set in bone holders, on an altar covered with a cloth steeped in blood. An ordinary looking knife with a short blade and a plain wooden handle. I knew straight away it was what I had been looking for. By its side was a scroll on which was written the incantation that must be spoken over it, each time it is used.

‘Armed with this weapon, I returned to the surface world, located the young woman, and tried it upon her. She died without a whimper, and my feelings of weakness were allayed.

‘For a long time I pondered these events. It seemed to me that they hinted at a way to alleviate the torment of a dull forever. I can remember clearly the moment I realised what that was. I had been on a drunk in London and was lying on the banks of the Thames, swigging from a bottle of liquor when it came to me. Were I able to trick people into following me into Tartarus, but prevent them from experiencing its worst terrors, and thus avoid driving them mad, I would have prey who could not die save by my hand, who, able to feel terror, would flee me, and whom I could pass the time in hunting down.

‘By the way, I know one of you is bound to ask, I have never worked out why those who enter Tartarus should become everliving. My best guess is that some dormant talisman is awoken by its hideous atmosphere.’

Elliot peered round at the company, as if seeking some proof of his hunch. Then he sneered, knocked the ash from the bowl of his briar and set to refilling it again. Once he had done so, he sat back in his chair, lit a match, held the flame to the tobacco, and puffed on the pipestem until it was smouldering and giving off a drab fug. Needless to say, the rest of us sat aghast and quaking.

‘As I have intimated,’ Elliot went on, ‘my first attempts to produce such specimens were unsuccessful, sometimes strikingly so. Indeed, one of my earliest failures has passed into legend. I spent the summer of the year 1680, living in Amsterdam, passing much of my time in drunkenness, in squalid establishments frequented by sailors. One day, I was drinking grog with an old tar when our talk turned to the matter of a vessel, a brigantine, whose figurehead, carved in the form of a wench dressed in tawdry, we had both noticed. The ship had been languishing in dock since the spring. My friend told me that its captain, a Hendrik Van der Decken, was having trouble hiring on hands. According to gossip, on his last trip out he had claimed before the entire ship’s company that he would rather be damned for all eternity and beat about the seas until the Last Judgement, than seek a safe harbour in a storm. The salts of

Amsterdam town, a superstitious lot, were chary of signing on with a skipper who had tempted fortune so.

‘Van der Decken’s rumoured rash declaration seemed to me a sign. I managed to get myself taken on as helmsman on board the craft, waited in Amsterdam until it had secured a full complement of crew, many of them desperate men. We got underway, I bided my time. Then, one fateful night off the Cape of Good Hope during a tempest, when I was at the wheel, I set a course for a fearsome whirlpool I knew, which sucked vessels down into a sunless sea where kraken spawned. I planned to allow the ship to gyre on the brink of the loathsome pit without entering, thus kindling immortality in the sailors without exposing them to the full horrors of Tartarus. But I was thwarted by the strength of the maelstrom, and, though the brigantine survived intact, it was drawn too far down and, by the time the vortex abated and spat us out, the captain and crew were terror-crazed and useless to me.<sup>5</sup> Without the wits to fear pain or extinction, they would have made poor quarries. In their frantic state they were very suggestible, and I amused myself by inculcating in them a peculiar horror of landfall. After I quit them, they sailed haphazard over the oceans for two centuries, keeping to the open sea, afeared to approach any coastline. But then, tiring of the fables that had sprung up about them, and irked by their renown, which far exceeded mine, though I courted infamy, I ended their miserable existences and sent their corpses, and their rotting vessel to the bottom of the sea.’<sup>6</sup>

Elliot drew musingly on his pipe several times, swilling the smoke around with his tongue, savouring it, before allowing it to spill from his mouth. No one spoke. Till then, terrified and enthralled, I had kept my eyes fixed upon Elliot, but at that moment I cast a glance round the Nightingale, saw that all was in darkness save our table, about which a greenish nimbus hung. The landlord must have turfed out the other patrons and shut up for the night; I can only surmise Elliot had drawn some mystic cloak about us that rendered us invisible and muted our noise.

‘Though I’ve never known the notoriety I crave, I have achieved a small measure of reflected fame,’ Elliot continued. ‘Some of those I’ve tried to make prey of over the years have been literary notables, who’ve gone on to write about their experiences, albeit indirectly. There was an English romantic who could not see clearly enough to follow me, as his sight was bleared by swigs of nepenthes, an Irish priest, who, of a suspicious cast of mind, was wary of me, no matter how benign the guise I wore, and thus resisted my wiles, an American sot whom, in the guise of a man named Reynolds I succeeded in tempting, but who was too fuddled to tread in my steps, though he wished to and I believe my pitch wormed into his heart, a French novelist, who, being of a scientific bent, chased away, in his mind, with the false light of reason, the shadows I showed him, and remained mortal for it seems a person must be frightened for the charm to be awoken in him or her, a poet, also a Frenchman, who had already too much of the darkness in him, eating away at his soul, just as syphilis was eating away at his brain, and who, had I allowed him to accompany me as he desired, would have been corrupted utterly, forever passed over to the other side, and yet another Frenchman, this one a prodigy, born and raised in Uruguay, who exalted me in his bizarre lays, but who was to die young, before I could drag him down into the dark hinterlands and strike deathlessness into his breast.’\* 7

Elliot scratched his nape.

‘With these men, my efforts were in vain, for the reasons I have described. Most often, however, I failed because I was unable to shield my victims from the more gruesome aspects of Tartarus. They became helplessly frenzied, and either ran raging and were lost to the eldritch realm forever, or returned from what they had seen, heard, and experienced, with bloodshot eyes, pierced eardrums, and feeble minds, as was the case with the Irish lass and the

\* Coleridge, I would guess. Maturin? Poe, definitely. French novelist – not sure. And of course Baudelaire and Ducasse – the self-proclaimed Comte de Lautréamont. Am I next? Can I place myself in such exalted company? Certainly not, my evil is too shabby, my imagination too tame. Why then has he come for me?

Dutch mariners.<sup>8</sup> Of these latter wretches most I have destroyed, for, though hunting down and murdering rank idiots can be no source of intellectual satisfaction, it does offer its own, visceral pleasures. Jane,’ he said, turning to the author, and grinning hideously, baring his teeth, ‘your husband is one of the former type, who, deranged, will roam Tartarean regions until the end of days. I now believe darkness already had its hooks in him before I got to him, some disturbing tomes he read in his youth. And,’ he continued, addressing me, ‘your friend Colin was one of the latter. I made away with him when I thought he might threaten my plans for you. I tortured him horribly, before stabbing him, and throwing him off that cliff.’

I beat my palm with my fist. Jane slumped with her head on the table and wept.

‘With you, however,’ he continued, stabbing a gnarled forefinger at each of us in turn, ‘my success has been complete. You are not my only triumphs, however. Over the years I have created many other sane immortals, men and women of all nations of the globe. But you are the first to see me as I really am, the first to hear my history. Of course, it was not my doing that brought you together, and it is merest chance that you all proved to be my victims, but it was an opportunity I could not resist.’

(I should say here, I have never managed to enter the otherworld, though I have devoted vast tracts of time to seeking out and poring over lore regarding it, hoping to learn how to cross its bourn, thinking I might find there some means to painlessly end my interminable life, or some weapon I could wield against Elliot. I cannot understand my failure – I have the required rituals by rote, know the location of many portals to that place. Unless it is that, terrified of what I might find there, I, without being conscious of it, sabotage my own efforts.)

Elliot sat back in his chair and blew out a cloud of smoke. It hung mysteriously in the air, and he sculpted it, using the stem of his pipe, into the form of a death’s head. Then he wafted it into the shadows that surrounded us with a wave of his hand.

‘For you, I am the sole bringer of death. Nothing can kill you, not sickness, not calamity, not your own hand, nor the hand of any mortal. Only the knife I spoke of can do it, and then



only if it is quickened by that formula only I know. But I will not send you off peacefully. It will be harrowing. Do not doubt this, I have had aeons to whet my cruelty. So don't seek me, prostrate yourself at my feet, once immortality becomes unendurable. Fly from me, quail at my approach always. I will seek you, I will hunt you down, and you will run. You, and those others like you, are to be my sport until the world is destroyed in fire as has been foretold.'

I looked around at the gathering. All bar Elliot were wan and cowering. A change came over Elliot's visage, the monstrous drained from it, and he looked a good-humoured pensioner once more.

'Go from this place,' he sang, smiling, to the tune of an air that seemed familiar to me, but which I could not place, beating his pipe in time, like a conductor's baton. 'You have six months before I set out on your trail, use them to get as far from here as possible. Not that it will make any odds, I will be dogged in my pursuit, and you will not evade me. I hope that some of you will be resourceful enough to keep me searching for a good while, though.'

With that, William, Claire, Jane, Duncan, and I left Elliot sitting at the table chuckling to himself, and scrambled for the door of the Nightingale. William reached it first, and discovering it locked, took up a bar stool, smashed out its etched glass window, then clambered through into the night. The rest of us followed him. Not one of us looked back, or said a word, and, as if by common agreement, we tore off in separate directions. Until I stumbled across William's body, I was not to see any of that company again. Why we did not remain together, aid and comfort each other, I do not know. I suppose we instinctively realised we would be easier to track down in a group than separately. The human animal is a selfish beast.

## XI

Early in the morning, this very day, or perhaps yesterday, for I have no way of knowing whether the witching hour has now passed, that which I had dreaded for an age finally came to pass. I can scarce believe it was only so short a time ago, so much has happened since.

It was just before dawn, though I only learnt so afterwards, when, on being toted up the companion-way and into the outer air, wrist and ankles bound with strong cord, I saw the sun cresting the eastern skyline. The tribeswoman's and my situation was, in the moments immediately prior, much as when I last described it – we were in the small office in the Ark's hold, trapped still – though we were even more wasted, thirstier than then. I was sitting at the desk, reading over the preceding section of this narrative, she was lying on her pallet motionless excepting an almost imperceptible rise and fall of her chest, cheeks sunken and hectic. I was astounded she had survived so long and felt sure her end would soon come, something I anticipated with a mixture of sadness and relief – sadness over losing her, relief that her sufferings would be at an end.

That was the scene in the cabin, one that had been little changed for many days, when there was a grating sound, and the door was thrown wide. A gibbous creature with swollen features and a hooked nose stumbled through the opening, its movements wooden, awkward. It was a life-sized Punch puppet. At first I thought myself delirious, but then, when it winked one wooden eyelid, in a manner both jocose and baleful, I realised it was Elliot. He was followed by a rabble of the local natives, some of whom carried flaming brands. Their faces were smeared with woad and they looked gaudy fiends in the flickering torchlight.

My heart pounded fit to burst.

I tried to get to my feet, meaning to resist, but, enfeebled by hunger, thirst, and the corrupt air of the hold, I found I could not, managed merely to raise myself a little way out of my chair – gripping the edge of the desk and supporting myself with my arms – before slumping back down again. The girl lifted her head and gazed blankly at the intruders; the sinews in her scrawny neck stood out like banjo strings, and a swag of spittle hung between the corner of her mouth and the coat that served her as a makeshift pillow.

We were soon trussed up like capons destined for the spit.

‘That’s the way to do it!’ Elliot jeered, voice shrill and reedy.<sup>1</sup>

Borne on the shoulders of the natives, we were carried up through the hold, out onto the deck, and down the gangplank. Elliot loped along, a little way out in front, turning from time to time to beckon the barbarians on and bark commands at them in their own tongue.

Pulled up on the mudflats a short way from the Ark was a barge woven from rushes. The girl and I were loaded on board – her first, listless and unresisting, then me, weakly struggling – and lain in the bows. The natives got behind the boat and launched it. It wallowed as Elliot and six heavyset brutes embarked, but found an even keel once they settled, Elliot on his feet in the stern, at the tiller, the tribesmen, having taken up paddles, kneeling in two rows on either side of the craft, facing forward. Their first few fierce strokes took us out into the centre of the river, then Elliot, pushing the helm away from him, swung the prow round so the barge was facing upstream. At first the clansmen, who sang a tuneless dirge in time to their strokes, laboured to paddle the craft against the current, but they were strong, deft, and it soon gained speed, and the mob on the shore, who had hitherto kept pace with the vessel, were outstripped. Elliot bellowed orders at his crew, stared fixedly ahead, where his spindly shadow, thrown by low sun behind him, darkened the water, keeping a look out for snags.

I think I must have drifted insensible for a short time, for I have no recollection of the barge’s landing. The next thing I remember clearly is being hefted by two of the paddlers across a marshy plain towards a palisade of tall pine stakes, erected on the edge of a broad

reach of grassland that lay beyond the boggy ground. It was encircled by hide tents that had been pitched as savages might gather round an idol – anxious to be in its presence, hopeful of receiving a boon, but keeping their distance, awed. As we neared the stockade I spotted a number of dark knobs mounted above the gate. I presumed them to be ornaments carved of a different wood, set there to relieve the whited austerity of the façade. Drawing closer, I saw I had been wrong, they were not ornamental, but minatory – a row of shrunken heads on spikes, facing outwards.<sup>2</sup> I stared at them aghast. They had mummied, leathery skin, fretted here and there by the wind to reveal flashes of bright scoured bone, a few sparse tufts of hair sprouting from their scalps, raw staring eyesockets, and knife-slash mouths.

Elliot, noting my gawking, gestured for the tribesmen to drop the girl and me, then stood next to where I lay, his hooked nose beetling over me.

‘I’ve found these brutes are more tractable when the threat of bloody death hangs over them,’ he said, by way of explanation. ‘Recognize that one over there?’

He pointed out the head at the far left of the line. It took me a moment to realise where I had seen its face before, shrivelled as it was – it was the chieftain who had showed me clemency.

‘No doubt you feel a pang of guilt over that,’ he said, sneering.

I groaned, ground my face in the dirt.

‘Callous fool,’ I hissed.

Rage seized Elliot’s Punch features, then bemusement clouded them. Finally, realising I chastised myself, he grinned, snickered.

‘Yes. It was for the compassion he showed you he was tortured and killed.’

But that was not the reason I was sore mortified, or not the only reason. It had occurred to me I had been as guilty as Elliot of hubris, of thinking myself fundamentally superior to the natives of this place. I may not have sought to subjugate, but I had made no effort to empathise, to understand, could easily have succumbed to cruelties to equal his; perhaps my

attitude was part of what drove the tribe into Elliot's iron clutches. Filled with remorse, I resolved, from that time forth, to abandon my aloofness to the peoples of the end of time.

Wishing, I believe, to start me from the pensive quiet I had fallen into, Elliot said, 'Killing a few keeps the rest on their toes, you see.'

'King Stork,' I murmured.<sup>3</sup>

'Huzzah, huzzah!' my captor crowed, then grinned, drawing back his lips to bare stained and caried teeth.

The tribeswoman, roused from her faint by his crowing, started, opened her eyes. I know not from what atavistic dreams the horrid sound had dredged her, but she uttered, weakly, a word in the language of her forefathers, that of this manuscript, 'Help.' But, sadly, I could not.

After that, those of us who had travelled in the barge waited in silence outside the entrance to the palisade for the rest of the clan to arrive. It was not long before I spotted them approaching us across the slade. Once they had joined us, Elliot directed the two men who had borne me before to take me over the threshold into the compound. They obeyed, though seemingly scared of entering the place; they paled, trod warily as if afraid of disturbing the slumbers of some fearsome beast, and, after putting me down, turned and fled. Then Elliot entered the enclosure and stood in the portal a moment, surveying the clan, who gazed back at him from a distance, quailing away from the stockade, reverent, clearly in thrall, but frightened. After giving vent to a series of howls and grunts that had the air of a brief impassioned victory address, Elliot closed the gate. I looked on through the narrowing opening as the tribe thronged around the young woman – my scribe and close companion, of whom, as you know, I had grown very fond – lashing out with fists and feet. Then the portal was shut, but I was not spared further anguish, for I could still hear, though they were muffled, the blows being dealt my stricken friend.

'Don't leave her out there,' I croaked.

‘Why not?’ Elliot asked. ‘It’s none of my concern. I’m happy to let them exact their own vengeance. No doubt it’ll lack subtlety, they’re a barbarous lot. But I’m sure it’ll be cruel enough, if not as wickedly inventive as your fate.’

I raised my head from the dirt to look up at him. He stood there, clad in the semblance of Punch, a malignant, hump-backed midget.

‘What are you planning, you monster?’ I stammered.

‘I’m not sure yet. I need to wait for inspiration. With some others, those who had something obvious I could seize upon, it was easier. I believe you saw the body of the young man who smoked so heavily that night in the pub?’

I shuddered at the memory, nodded.

Elliot turned his eyes upon me; they burned ireful in Punch’s outlandish face.

‘What was his name?’ he asked.

‘Don’t remember.’

‘No, neither do I. But then I’ve forgotten all your names, can’t even recall the one I gave that evening.’

He walked past me and entered a log cabin. I waited a while, watching, but he did not reappear again. I strained against my bonds, but soon abandoned my feeble exertions; I had been tightly bound, and the knots held.

I found by wriggling and turning my head this way and that I was able to piece together from fragmentary impressions the enclosure in which I found myself. It is fairly large and roughly square, enclosed on all sides by the fence of pine pales, and has at its centre two small buildings – the cabin I had seen Elliot enter (I persist in calling him Elliot for the sake of consistency, so as not to confuse you, my supposed, hoped-for reader), and a small round house of open-faced flint with a slate roof like a limpet shell. A curtain of dark heavy fabric hangs in the entrance to the cabin. It was not drawn all the way across – from what I could glimpse through the gap, an iron cot and a wooden table, I presumed the building to be

Elliot's living quarters. The round house has a sturdy oak door reinforced by iron battens and secured by a large antiquated padlock, and an air of some age – ivy garlands, and mosses and lichens beset its walls. Thinking on this now, I realise it probably long predates Elliot's arrival in the region, that he chose to place his stockade on this site because of it; as the spot is exposed, out on an open plain, I can see no other advantage to it.

The ground within the compound is bare earth, packed hard, trampled. As my bearers had been terrified to enter the place, and the rest of the tribe had seemed loath to approach it this bewildered me. I suppose the fear probably arises from a prohibition imposed by Elliot, which is lifted on occasion for ceremonies or dark revels.

I looked up at the backs of the impaled heads, at the sparse strands of hair that clung to their scalps and at their withered napes, and I trembled.

Thoroughly dispirited, I hoped for a quick death I knew would never be granted me.

I had been lying listless, despairing, seared by the unrelenting sun, my eyes closed, for a while, before I was started from my torpor by a grating, shrill voice.

'You're the very last of all my quarries, by the way. The rest I have sought out and slain.'

I peeled back my lids. Squinting against the sun's glare, I made out Elliot, still in the guise of Punch, standing at my feet. Though his mouth was set in a cruel smirk, there was a hint of weakness in the turn of his features – that trace of vulnerability which mitigates Punch's wickedness, allows the audience to laugh at his violent and cruel outrages. Knowing Elliot not to have a like scrap of frailty, I found this grotesque.

I stuck out my tongue, an empty gesture of defiance. Reaching down, Elliot seized hold of the rope that tied my ankles, and began to haul me across the ground towards the round house. My head dragged in the dirt.

'You should pride yourself on having evaded my clutches for so long,' Elliot went on, red-faced and breathless with exertion.

I sneered.

‘Why? It wasn’t difficult.’

Elliot let go my feet and stood with his palms in the small of his back, stretching out his crooked spine. Then he spat into the dust, kicked me in the head. I blacked out.

I had an uncanny vision while insensible. In it, reduced to the stature of a small child, I perched at the top of a massy staircase hewn from red marble. This flight of steps stood incongruous in the midst of a barren waste girded round by sawtooth mountains. Lowering clouds racked across the sky, away to the west, apparently driven by a gale, though not a breath of wind could be felt where I stood. Occasional rents in the shroud afforded glimpses of a pale winter sun. Brass handrails, supported by posts of turned wood, ran down each side of the staircase.

A lone horseman was crossing the plain towards me, slumped forward in the saddle, cutting the bad out of an apple, so dried, withered, and worm-eaten I would have thought it entirely inedible in any case, with a knife too big for the task. He was garbed in a suit, a long wool overcoat, and a hat with a wide floppy brim, which was pulled down low over his eyes. He and his mount, a skittish, starveling stallion, were so greyed by dirt thrown up by the animal’s splayed and bloody hooves, they seemed moulded from the dust of the waste through which they passed.

Reaching the staircase the rider dismounted, tethered his horse by its reins to the foot of the balustrade, put the knife into a pannier slung over the animal’s flank, sat down on the bottom step, and bit into the apple. I stood transfixed, unable to move. The man ate the fruit slowly, nibbling it, then cast its core away.

Getting to his feet, he crossed over to the stallion and reached into the pannier. He rummaged around, then drew something out, concealed it in his coat, began ascending to where I stood. As he climbed, he raised his head to look up at me under his hat brim. I saw it



was the young chieftain whose act of kindness towards me had cost him his life. But his face was that of the severed head I had seen on the spike, not that of the living man; it resembled the apple he had just eaten – its skin was puckered, its orbits were hollow pits like grub pocks.

It was only when he reached the top step and stood at my side I realised how much taller the spectre was than I – he towered over me, I came only to his knees. He took out the thing he had hidden in the folds of his coat. It was a small fish of a breed I did not recognize; it had barbels sprouting from its top lip that resembled the waxed whiskers of a sideshow impresario. It was rancid, a stinking gleet ran from its mouth. Hunkering down, the chieftain shook it in my face, then began to speak.

‘I wanted to show you this. Look here.’

He pointed out four appendages which hung, limp, from the body of the putrid fish.

‘These are vestigial limbs, not inchoate ones. Do you see!’ suddenly he was shouting, and I was bowed over backwards like a sapling in the teeth of a storm. ‘The creatures of the land are returning to the sea. Creation is in disarray!’

‘What?’ I asked. ‘Isn’t this the end of the world, in any case?’

He shook his head slowly.

‘You do not understand,’ he lamented, speaking quietly once more. ‘It was too much to hope you would, I guess.’

He shook his head wearily, descended to his horse. After unhitching it, he clambered into the saddle and rode off. I watched him crossing the plain, returning the way he had come. The sun was low in the sky, and he cast a scraggy shadow. Then the wan orb went down behind the peaks to the west, gushing blood, and the light grew crepuscular. The chieftain was swallowed up by the gloom. I stood, mute and motionless as a stone, until all was dark without relief.

Then followed another fantasy. I was sitting astride a tiger that loped at a hideous velocity through the air, a calm slate-grey ocean racing past beneath. Lest I be thrown, I clung

on with a fierce grip, my hands buried in the beast's fur.<sup>4</sup> Looking ahead, I saw we approached a range of vapour like a limitless cataract rolling silently into the sea from some immense and far distant rampart in the heaven. We were nearly upon this pallid veil when I came to. Just before I did, I sighted a giant shrouded human figure looming out of the mist.<sup>5</sup>

On regaining consciousness, I found myself lying on my back on a patch of dank earth. Pain made an uproar in my skull. All about was gloom, but a shaft of light fell across my eyes; I shifted my head out of its path, then looked about. I saw I was in a sunless cell with stone walls – the interior of the round house. The door was slightly ajar, the bright spear that had dazzled me fell in through the gap. There were chains ending in manacles and gyves affixed to the walls. They gleamed, I could tell they were new, but it occurred to me the place might have, in times long past, been a lock-up. Elliot crouched in the dark near the door, breathing hard, regarding me with ire. Seeing my gaze alight on him, he forced a smile.

‘So, finally got you, eh? Of all of them you proved the most cunning. Much more resourceful than I expected. You seemed so unworldly.’

‘But what of... the young man, the smoker?’ I had had to bite my tongue to keep from calling him William. ‘He held out almost as long as I have.’

‘Oh, I found him centuries ago holed up in the ancient sewage tunnels beneath the ruins of London. I thought he might be my last remaining beguilement, so I toyed with him for a good while before killing him.’ Elliot smirked. ‘I wondered if I’d been mistaken about you, thought perhaps eternity hadn’t been wakened in your breast. If you hadn’t come back here I might never have realised you were still living.’

Tears of frustration sprang into my eyes, I cursed bitterly. Elliot cackled.

‘The yearning always waxes too strong,’ he said. ‘They all return home sooner or later.’

I cast him a sullen glance.

‘Where have you been hiding all this time?’

Turning my head away from him, I spat. My spittle flecked the dust.

‘No matter. Soon you’ll be telling me everything in exchange for a brief remission of the torment.’

I was rattled, but shammed bravery, taunted him.

‘You don’t frighten me. I returned here to seek you out. I’m tired of life and any end to it will be a blessing. The horrors of your poor imagining will no doubt prove risible.’

His face clouded. Crossing over to me, he took a knife from a sheath hanging at his belt. I hoped this was the blade of which he had spoken that night in the Nightingale, the one he had found in a shrine in the otherworld, and, enraged, he would plunge it in me, finish me. But that was not to be – he was in command of his temper. He cut through my bonds, twisted his fingers into my hair, and hauled me to my feet. Drained, I stood there tottering, unsteady as a toddler.

‘Come on you poltroon, you pigeon-hearted prick!’ he bellowed.

I set my teeth hard, let my chin drop, closed my eyes, resolved to take the beating well, to choke my groans and whimpers, to provoke with my fortitude.

Elliot sparred at me a little, but realising I was not going to put up a fight, he, belying the feebleness he had hitherto shown, picked me bodily up and hurled me to the floor. The air was driven from my lungs, I bit my tongue. Cowering away, I crawled backwards until I struck the wall, then slumped against it, struggled to get my breath back. The salt tang of blood was in my mouth.

‘Nowhere to run now, rat.’

He approached me capering and warbling a ditty in a cracked, tuneless voice.

Right foll de riddle loll,

I know a craven soul.

He hid like a rat,

But I found him out,

And dragged him from his hole!

Lying on my side, I drew my knees up to my chest and wrapped my head in my arms.

Elliot vented his wrath in a hail of blows.

‘Hee, hee, hee. Weakling. You’re pitiful!’

The pain was dire, and I drifted into welcome oblivion once more.

On recovering my senses, I found Elliot had dragged me over to the chains, shackled my wrists and ankles. The door was shut, but chinks between the slates overhead and the stones of the walls let in slender shafts of light, sufficient to see by. These beams, recalling blades, put me in mind of an illusion I had learnt once during a stint as a conjurer, a long time ago, which involved running a cramped cabinet, containing an audience member or assistant, through with swords. I was led to mull over the nature of remembrance. It struck me memory’s ability to draw such apt comparisons, the basis, I would hazard, of all invention, is augmented with its hoard of reminiscences. A clammy dread threw its coils around me then, for I realised, given the aeons for which he has lived, Elliot is doubtless possessed of prodigious ingenuity and unlikely to fail to dream up some unendurable torture for me.

I was still pondering my fate, when, a short while later, the door opened, and Elliot, now in the form of the genial old man I recalled from the evening in the Nightingale, threw the tribeswoman’s and my meagre possessions, obviously brought back from the Ark by some of the natives, into the cell along with me. Not long afterwards, he returned and began to go through them. I had thought it would solace me for him to abandon the guise of Punch, but I actually found his true aspect even more disquieting, for it suggested benignity. Though it had hinted at a human weakness alien to the stuff of his being, the hooknose’s loathsome phizog had not belied the antic evil of his innards in the same way.

‘There’s nothing there that’ll interest you,’ I croaked.

Elliot, engrossed, cast no glance in my direction, continued to look through the objects strewn on the floor. He spent some time absorbed in the contemplation of the typewriter, turning it about in his hands, scrutinising it from all angles. Then he exclaimed, 'Ah!', nodded to himself, put the mechanism down, and began rifling through the remaining things. It was not long before he found this document. Riffling through the pages he, at first, looked perplexed. Then comprehension flooded his features. He giggled nastily, put the manuscript down to rub his hands together in glee. I ranted, begged him not to destroy my work. Once he had composed himself, he looked at me, said simply, 'We'll see', and took up my papers again, before leaving the round house, still grinning horribly.

He left me then for some time. I writhed my way into a seated posture, leaning against the wall; lying sprawled on the mud floor had begun to give me great discomfort. This took a while, fettered as I was. Once I was easier in my body, my mind was free to wander, and I was afflicted by a terrible anxiety, was terrified Elliot had taken my memoir away to burn it. When he came back, though, it appeared I had been granted a reprieve – he held my story in his hand.

'This isn't all that bad,' he commented. 'I found it quite gripping. I'm dying to know how it ends.'

He fleered, showing a line of stained and crooked teeth.

'The tone is overwrought, though, and some of the writing stilted, mannered.'

I lifted my head from my chest, where it lolled, rolled my eyes contemptuously, and tried to spit, but my mouth was too parched.

'Just a little constructive criticism,' Elliot jeered. 'Anyway, don't worry, I'm not going to destroy it, much as it would hurt you, and give me pleasure. I've devised a more apt torture. I know you won't be able to resist continuing your narrative, whatever you have to suffer. Besides I'm itching to read your account of everything that has happened today. I want you to get on with it straight away.'

‘But I’m too weak to write anything now,’ I protested.

‘Well then you will have something to drink and some food to eat. That should get your strength up.’

And that is why I have spent the last few hours in the round house, seated at a rickety wooden desk, composing the foregoing story of my capture. When Elliot came in to release me from my chains and give me the things that clutter the desk’s surface – an oil lamp to see by, a tin mug filled with water, and a dish containing salty scraps of bacon rind and stale crusts of bread – he told me to write it as swiftly as I could, and to call out for him once I was done. I had no need to bring things to a fitting conclusion, he said, as there would be more to record.

Then, before he left me, he flayed the skin from my fingertips and tore my nails from the quick, making typing an agony. As he surmised, though, I have been driven to write on in spite of the pain. The typewriter is gory – I worry its mechanisms may become clotted – and these pages are covered with grisly smears.<sup>6</sup> Yet, to me, the blood I have shed is like the blood of a birthing, for as my life draws near its end, so inevitably does this tale, which is a record of it, and I feel a sense of pride that I, whose aeonial existence has been such a vapid waste, will leave something entire behind me, which, despite its manifold faults, will endure, whether it finds a reader other than my murderer, or not.

## XII

When I finished composing the preceding section, I shouted out as instructed, and Elliot came, took the pages away, and put me back in shackles.

Some time passed before he returned. I had drifted asleep, and he roused me by thrusting a lamp into my face; it must still have been night, for it was dark outside.

He held the account of my capture in one hand and, in the other, a bowl, which he put down at my feet. I peered at it, but could not, in the gloom, make out its contents.

‘This is good,’ he asserted, waving the pages in my face. ‘I particularly liked the passage describing your strange dreams. I wonder what gave rise to them?’

‘No idea,’ I mumbled, not yet quite awake.

‘No? Out of interest, why did you call me Elliot?’

‘On a whim.’

‘Oh. It’s not a name I would ever chosen for myself,’ he said, hooking the handle of the lantern over a nail sticking out from one of the rafters overhead, ‘though, for some reason, it does have a certain sinister quality which is apt.’

Then he reached down, unlocked the manacles, and freed my arms.

‘Hold out your hands.’

I did as I was told. I was inclined to docility, my will broken by all I had endured. Seizing my wrists, Elliot plunged my fingers, open sores to the first knuckle, into the bowl.

It was filled with brine. The salt burned.

On being awoken by my keening, the natives slumbering in their tents round about the palisade perhaps imagined it the wail of some strange beast, brought into this world from other, forbidden realms by incantation, for it little resembled a human cry.

Once the pain had waned, I looked up at my persecutor.

‘Just kill me.’

Elliot smirked.

‘Don’t worry, death is coming to you, and soon. First, however, I want you to finish your tale. It would be incomplete, wouldn’t it, if it didn’t contain a description of the way I plan to snuff your life? And don’t you think your readers will be curious to discover how the others who assembled that evening in the Nightingale met their ends?’

I was frantic to avoid hearing how I was to die, desperate not to have to listen to Elliot bragging about the foul murders he had committed – I was sure it would be anguish – but, knowing I had little choice, that he would coerce me, I made no attempt to stop my ears.

‘By the way, I feel I should also tell you what has befallen that other central character in your tale, the young tribeswoman. Last I saw of the natives, which was several hours ago, they were leaving their camp, dragging her broken body with them, clamouring for blood. I believe they were headed for the river. They have not returned as yet, but no doubt by now the girl is dead.’

I groaned. Elliot cuffed me hard on the ear.

‘Shut up and listen!’

Cowed, I nodded.

‘Right. Shall I describe to you how you’re to be murdered first, or save that for later and begin by telling you how I ended the lives of the others who responded to your imbecilic advertisement?’

I shrugged.

Elliot furrowed his greasy hair with his fingers.

‘I think I’ll begin with the others. That way you’ll be kept on tenterhooks. I won’t bother recounting how the young man you’ve called William Adams died. What you inferred from



the state of his body was pretty much dead right. But let me tell you how I killed the other two...’

Though I had now grown afeared of provoking him, perplexed, I interrupted.

‘But what of the young woman, the one who didn’t have a chance to tell her story?’

‘Yes. I’d all but forgotten. I was wrong about her, as I thought I might have been in your case. Her fleeting experience of the dark underbelly of things did not quicken the dormant charm, and I watched her age, sicken, and die.’

Elliot then went on to describe, with gruesome fidelity, the murders of Duncan and Jane. I can only bring myself to venture the scantest sketches here, so sickening were the particulars.

Duncan was the first victim Elliot located, mere days after the gathering in the Nightingale. It would seem that he had found the prospect of a hunted existence intolerable, for he made no effort to evade capture – returned to Glasgow, went on with his life as formerly. Elliot, furious at being denied any sport by this, devised a cruel punishment. After severing the Scot’s three remaining limbs with a cleaver seized from the rack hanging in his butcher’s shop, Elliot placed him in a sack and lugged him into the catacombs beneath the Necropolis. After throwing him down in a sarcophagus in one of the lower crypts, Elliot left him to moulder a very long time, returning once in a while to harrow him, and to pour water down his gullet and stuff his mouth with morsels to ensure vacancy brought on by thirst and hunger did not spare him torment.

When Elliot finally hefted him from his stone bedstead – where he had lain for centuries on a mattress of scattered bones, under a counterpane of cobwebs – and carried him out into the daylight, he was brainsick, babbled incessantly about the slimy things that dwelt in the pit.<sup>1</sup> By careful ministering, Elliot restored his sanity and vigour, and, by sorcery, grafted on to his trunk new arms and legs; limbs hacked from a drunken student. Elliot then forced him to partake in perverse and bloody revels. Once he was inured to the foulest horrors, Elliot took

him into the blackest regions of Tartarus, and together they wallowed in depravity. On their return to the mundane realm, Duncan, corrupted utterly, followed Elliot slavishly, and the pair wandered the globe indulging in degenerate and cruel acts. After a time, Elliot tired of his toady, made away with him, cutting his throat with the knife brought back from the pit.

Jane's murder was far less drawn out, but equally grotesque. Several hundred years after the evening in the Nightingale, Elliot found her hiding in a cave in the Australian Outback. He showed her the terrifying avatars of that place, those beings that the Aborigines had communed with in olden times. Then, assuming the form of her long-dead eldest son Peter, he raped, tortured, and dispatched her.

Listening to Elliot recount these events, I felt great sorrow over Duncan's and Jane's fates, and, breath bated, waited for mine to be revealed.

I did not have to wait too long. Once Elliot had finished relating how Duncan and Jane were harrowed and slain, he, feeling peckish, left me to go and eat something. But he soon returned. After hawking up a glob of phlegm, which he spat into his palm and anointed my brow with, he began.

'I have whetted the point of my little sticker till it would be keen enough to anatomize a flea. With it I will, painstakingly,' here he paused to grin, 'carve into your flesh the entire text of your manuscript. The script will perforce be tiny, but the cuts will be deep enough that each letter will be agony.'

Overcome with dread and misery, I howled. But this cry was choked by a cackling that welled within me, born of the eerie mirth of abjection and misery. Elliot looked vexed, fell into a thoughtful silence.

He remained contemplative awhile, and I recovered my senses.

'Of course,' he said eventually, 'such a torture would be ecstasy for you. I should have realised. Well, I will forgo it. I have dreamt up many other evils.'

He went on to tell much of what he plans for me, though he did leave some gaps for my imagination to plug with lurid speculations. I gazed listlessly up at him; he stood between me and the lantern, an aureole encircled his head. I cannot bring myself to repeat the terrors he described – I wish to put them from my mind while I await their execution. So, should anyone ever peruse these pages other than Elliot, should you, my chimerical reader, be summoned into existence by my constant invocations, you will have to suffer this one lacuna. I feel I have been a constant narrator else. Besides, you will, of course, have imposed like abrasions on this text's filmy surface, either by skimming dull passages, or by losing your place and accidentally skipping ahead.<sup>2</sup>

The one thing that solaces me as the dread hour approaches is that Elliot has assured me he will not destroy this manuscript. He said he wishes its record of his cruelties to be preserved for posterity, though I believe he, as I do, doubts anyone able to read the language it is written in remains on this earth.

'So,' Elliot concluded. 'I'll allow you a short time to bring your tale to an apt end. Then... Well, you know what will happen then.'

With that he unchained me, waited while I took a seat at the desk, then furnished me with paper, and walked out into the night, locking the door behind him.

And so now I really am finished. For all that I may have given the appearance of being resigned to my death these last pages, if I am to be truthful it is only now I confront its inevitability stripped of all hope – till this moment there remained, tucked away in the innermost recesses of my brain, a faint foolish glimmer of a reprieve. I felt I could spin out my tale until my tormentor's heart softened, or at least draw my story thin until the end of the world came to spare me from a wracking at his hand.<sup>3</sup> But it is over now, the stretched thread

of my narrative has snapped – I have nothing more to relate that can enthrall him. Besides, omens foretell my imminent doom: a little while ago I noticed a fitful reddish light filtering in through the chinks in the walls and roof and, getting up from the desk and pressing my eye to a crevice in the masonry just above the bolts from which the chains hang, I saw a bloodmoon, floundering in a turbulent sea of grey cloud, bathing the earth with its gory lustre; and, not long after that, several birds alighted on the slates overhead and have perched there ever since – I can hear the scrabbling of their talons and from their raucous cawing I know them to be carrion crows.

It has taken me only an hour or so to compose this chapter, which I am sure shall be my last. In a short time I will call out to Elliot, who will take these sheets from me, and my drawn out and agonizing death will follow. Therefore, my reader, if you exist, and I pray you do, this must be my farewell. Though in no mood to make it a sentimental one, I will say this – disburdening my mind onto these pages these last few months has been a great consolation. Now I must take my leave; I wish to spend a moment alone in this dank cell, in quiet reflection, before I holler out to the devil who will rob me of my life.

### XIII

It seems I misread the signs, for I eluded the clutch of Death's claw (I hope this gladdens you, my reader, but, though I cling to the faint hope you have been, and remain, captivated by my tale, I know it is likely that, wearied by its ravelled skeins, you have long since lost interest. I would urge you to read on, however, things are drawing to a close and it would be foolish to have come this far only to quit now).

When I left off writing at the end of the preceding chapter, a good many years ago now, it was to sit in quiet contemplation for a short time, before shouting to Elliot to let him know my work was done. I did so. He entered the hut almost immediately upon my calling out; I suppose he had been standing just outside the door, perhaps to harken to my groans as I typed. After putting me back in shackles, he seized hold of the pages I had left by the typewriter and approached me.

'I'll take this away and read it,' he said, 'leaving you alone to brood upon your coming demise. When I come back it will be to snuff your life. Slowly.'

While pondering, I had determined not to meet my end meekly, knowing it would be intolerable cruelty whether I was submissive or defiant. So I gobbled on Elliot's boots. He looked down at the spittle mottling the leather, glared wrathful at me, punched me in the mouth. Then, turning on his heel, he left the round house without another word. I let my chin fall to my chest and drivelled blood down my shirtfront.

Some hours passed. I found comfort and distraction from my plight in musing on the lore of the Himalayan tribes amid whom I had lived for so long time. They held that, if certain observances – including, chanting potent mantras, stopping up the base orifices and prising

open the fontanelle of the crown – were followed during the passing of the flesh, it was possible for the immortal spirit to pass into the realm of the gods. If the correct path was taken through that land and the good and evil deities met on the way were offered the prescribed ritual tributes, it was possible to achieve liberation from the wheel of being.<sup>1</sup>

Though I gave them scant credence, my reason found refuge in these ancient beliefs – tenets of a faith that, passed down through generations of sequestered Himalayans, had outlasted all others – and, therefore, when Elliot opened the door and entered the round house once more, I was not raving, as he had anticipated, had hoped, but sat quiet in my chains. I saw he held his oil lamp and my manuscript, which was tied up with twine. He put both down on the floor by my feet, then went out, returning a few moments later clutching a flint and steel striker. I remained calm even as he shook these things in my face, for, distraught as I was, I did not recognize them.

Evidently Elliot found my serenity provoking, for he hit me in the face again, harder this time – shivering several of my teeth, and splitting his knuckles to the bone. Cursing, he took a handkerchief from his breast pocket and wrapped it around his hand. Then he undid the knot securing the string binding my account, unwound it from the sheaf, and began loosely crumpling the pages and piling them in front of me.<sup>2</sup>

‘Your attempt to gull me,’ he said, sneering, ‘make me think your earlier fit of laughter was despairing, not rapturous, was pitiable. I saw straight through that contrivance. If you hoped you might trick me into graving your carcass after all, you were mistaken.’

(I have since spent many hours pondering the meaning of these words. Obviously Elliot thought the inscription of my tale upon my flesh would send me into blissful transports, where he was determined only to bring on paroxysms of fear and woe. Why he should have thought this though, I cannot guess. Perhaps he suspected me of harbouring a desire to pass from this too, too solid flesh to the glittering abstraction of language. If so he misunderstood my motives for writing.)<sup>3</sup>

‘Furthermore, I was vexed you didn’t describe any of my other gruesome plans for your murder,’ Elliot went on. ‘And surprised, especially since you tried to fool me, that you didn’t realise I was cozening you.’

‘What?’ I mumbled, through a mouthful of broken teeth.

‘I always planned, of course, to destroy your memoir as part of your torment.’

I shook with impotent fury.

Elliot fleered.

‘I had a feeling that might disconcert you.’

He looked down at his wound. Blood had soaked through his makeshift bandage, was beading on the cloth. Distractedly, he raised his hand to his mouth and put out his tongue to lap at the gouts.

I beseeched, but to no avail. Elliot ignored me, went on preparing the fire that was to burn up my manuscript. Realising it was futile, I stilled my pleas, sat and looked on dejectedly. Occasionally, Elliot paused in his work to cavort and sing coarse ditties. He belted out the lyrics of one crude song that told of a woman’s disappointment with her inadequate lover, with pointed emphasis.

It took Elliot some time to build his pyre. I watched him utterly despondent. I felt, since no one apart from that fiend would ever read my manuscript, my travail had been wasted.

Once he had finished, Elliot straightened up, stood grimacing, kneading the knotty ridge of his spine.

‘It gives me such a lot of pain,’ he said, turning to me. ‘I’ve tried everything, but nothing seems to soothe this wretched backache of mine.’

He squinted at me.

‘All the fight’s gone out of you, hasn’t it?’

I looked away.

A high gloating gurgle broke from Elliot's lips. Then, looking down at his injured hand, he unwound his handkerchief, and, seeing the gash was still bleeding, retied the gore-steeped cloth more tightly. Afterwards he left the hut, to return a moment later carrying a metal stake and a mallet.

Crossing over, he put these things down on the ground, then seized the iron bar linking the gyves fettering my ankles and hauled on it, stretching my legs out in front of me so my feet nestled in among the crumpled sheets of paper. When he let go, I bent my knees to draw my feet back in.

He yelled, stentorian, 'Don't! I'll only be forced to break your legs.'

Then he went on, much more quietly, in a matter-of-fact tone, 'Now, I'm just going to secure your feet with this stake so you can't flinch away. Don't move or it'll go worse for you.'

He turned and hunkered down to pick up the mallet and spike. At that moment, I saw, in the doorway, a rawboned figure outlined against the eerie glimmer of the bloodmoon. Stepping forward into the roundhouse, this creature was thrown into relief by the lantern's wavering light. I gasped. It was a dread freak, human in form, but with a dusk-red warty hide, and awful, staring eyes.

Alerted by my sharp intake of breath, Elliot looked up. The freak darted at him, wrested the things he held from his grasp, and lashed out with the hammer, striking him a blow on the brow. He staggered backwards, then toppled, landing flat on his back. Falling upon him, the freak held the point of the stake over his heart, drove it through his chest and into the ground with the mallet. Elliot threshed, his ankles drubbed the earth, his arms lashed the air. A horrid rattle welled from his gorge.

Aghast, I feigned death – drooping my eyelids, lolling my head. But wind gusting in through the open door drove the choking billows of dust raised by Elliot's flailing into my mouth and nostrils, and I spluttered and coughed. The freak loped over, stared intently at me.



I cowered away, terrified, then, peering closely, discerned the features of my amanuensis, the tribeswoman, under a scabrous caking of estuary mud.

‘I’m so glad you’re still alive,’ she said. ‘I was afraid he’d killed you already.’

My brain reeled. I stared up at her agape, wide eyed. Bloody slobber ran from my open mouth. She shuddered, put down the mallet, reached out, took my head in her hands.

‘What has he done to you?’

Then, noting my bemusement, she went down on her haunches next to me, shook her head indulgently.

‘Haven’t you worked it out yet? I’m Claire.’

Elliot was yawping fit to drown her words, so she was forced almost to shout. We both turn to look at him, but he remained transfixed by the spike.

‘Claire,’ I echoed, staggered.

‘Of course, that’s not my real name, the one my parents gave me, which I’ve forgotten, just as you have yours. But, yes, I am the woman you’ve called Claire in your narrative.’

I knew immediately this was true. It accounted for a number of enigmas – the fact she had seemed familiar to me; her hardiness – her survival after we ingested the bane-laced victuals left us by the natives; and her facility for typing up my edited proofs – an aptitude which should have told me she knew the English language, but that I explained away with an absurd rationalization.

‘Where are the keys to the restraints?’ she asked.

‘He has them.’

I nodded towards where Elliot lay snarling and writhing, pinned by the stake; the keys were threaded onto a large brass ring, which hung from one of the belt loops of his trousers.

Claire went over, crouched down, and reached out warily for the keyring. But she had strayed too close – lunging, Elliot managed to clutch her ankle. She attempted to struggle free, but his grip was fierce. With his free hand he took hold of the end of the spike, which jutted

from his chest, started rocking it from side to side, moaning low. Blood foamed up. I looked on in terror. At first the stake held fast, but he persevered, and after a time it began to come loose.

Elliot crowed, but his glee was over-hasty; the hand he held Claire with was that he had hurt thumping me – she twisted, and it would seem the wound panged, for he hissed, and loosened his grasp. She was able to wrest her ankle free. Returning to where I sat, she took up the mallet, then went back over to him. He reached out to grab her once more, but by striking out with the hammer, she was able to fend him off. After seizing the keys, she drove the spike again.<sup>4</sup> Elliot clenched his fists, threw his head back, yowled; his knuckles were white, the tendons in his neck, drawn thin and taut, and his forehead glistened with sweat.

Claire unlocked the fetters that held me in silence. Then, when I was free, we crossed over to where Elliot sprawled prone and impaled. He had begun, once more, to try to work the stake free. Claire smote his hand with the mallet, scowling he let it fall to his side. He seemed sore beat out. Then, rallying himself, he bawled something in the natives' tongue.

Claire waited till he had done hollering, then said sardonically, 'Save your breath. They've fled, will be long gone by now.'

Elliot snorted. Glared at us. Looking into his eyes I was shocked to see fear and pain there. It was as if I had glimpsed a fish swimming in the depths of a turbid pool whose waters I had been sure were hostile to life. Then this trace of human frailty fled away.

'As soon as you leave,' he sneered, 'I'll pull out this wretched thing, come after you.'

'No you won't,' Claire spat, 'because we are going to kill you.'

'How?' Elliot jeered, raising his eyebrows.

'With your knife. I've not forgotten it.'

Elliot fled.

Taking hold of Claire's elbow I led her outside the hut.

'What of the formula, the incantation?' I whispered.

‘Let’s at least try the blade,’ Claire said. ‘You stay, watch him, I’ll go look for it.’

Handing me the mallet, she crossed over to Elliot’s abode, went inside. I re-entered the lock-up.

Elliot looked up at me.

‘I can’t fathom it. As I told you, I watched her age and die.’

After a short time Claire returned, clutching in her fist an ordinary-looking blade, rusty and dull.

‘This must be it. I found it on top of a pile of instruments of torture. I think we should try it.’

I nodded. Squatting beside Elliot, Claire grasped the blade’s hilt, lifted it aloft. She was about to stab down at Elliot’s chest, when he held up his hands.

‘First, a question.’

Claire seemed to consider this, then shrugged her shoulders.

‘Alright, go on.’

‘I want to know how you tricked me. I watched you grow old and die. Yet, here you are.’

Claire looked at Elliot puzzled, started to shake her head. Then seemingly realisation dawned.

‘I had a twin sister.’ Here she paused a short time, lost in reflection. ‘On the evening of the gathering in the pub, I went straight to her, explained everything. At first she thought the whole thing utterly fantastic, of course, but I persisted. We were very close, there was a bond of trust between us. We had lost our parents a few years before, and had no one else, were each others’ whole world. She believed me when she saw how desperate I was. It was she who came up with the plan.’

‘What was it?’ Ire flashed in Elliot’s eyes. His forehead had begun to bruise.

I giped at him.

‘Seems she befooled you.’

Claire, apparently in transports of melancholy, was motionless. In that pose, hunkered down, holding the knife blade downward over Elliot's breast, with her skin daubed with the reddish clay, she looked like the high priestess of some olden religion who hoped to propitiate a cruel deity with a human sacrifice.

'We left London and went into hiding,' she continued, her eyes fogged with paining remembrance. 'We spent a few, short years together, then my sister returned to London, feigned she was me. We hoped that you,' she cast a brief glance down at Elliot, 'would find her, see she had aged, and thinking she was me, believe you had failed, leave her be and not seek me out. I didn't want her to take the chance, but she insisted. We could never see each other again, of course, it would have ruined everything. That was very hard for me.'

Then, with sudden ferocity, she plunged the knife into Elliot's heart. Blood welled forth, sluggish, dark, and I gagged on the reek of it.

Elliot groaned, pitifully. We were all silent and still a while, a tableau of horror. Then Elliot opened wide his mouth, poured forth a bray of scornful mirth.

Absently, Claire drew out the dagger and chucked it into a dark corner of the round house. A rat scurried squeaking through the nimbus thrown by the lantern and out the door.

'You can't kill me!' Elliot vociferated. 'You may have deceived me, but you can't best me.'

Claire sighed, tore a strip of cloth from the sleeve of Elliot's shirt, wadded it up, and crammed it into his mouth. She got to her feet and left the round house. I waited for her to come back, mallet in hand, looking warily down at Elliot. He winked, mumbled around the makeshift gag, but his words were muffled, I could not make them out.

After a few minutes Claire came back clutching a rusty old saw, a hacksaw with a wooden handle, shook it in my face.<sup>5</sup> I looked at her blankly. She then pointed down at Elliot, mumbled sawing. As if she could not bear to give voice to what she planned, as if to do so would defile her utterly. He understood the meaning of her gnomish gestures before I did,

shrank back; the weakness I had before seen in his eyes returned to them, but again, only for an instant, before being replaced by insouciance.

Then Claire and I set about our task without a word. How long we laboured, I cannot say – time was gravid with horror, swollen and ponderous. The day was chill, but the sweat ran from our brows. We took turns with the saw. Its handle was broken, all that remained was a small fragment with jagged, splintery edges, so we were forced to turn it about, grip its other end, which made work awkward. At one point a dog came to the door, yapping; I had to drive it off with the mallet. We shut the door then, wary of fiercer beasts being lured by the blood scent. Conditions inside the round house worsened after that, forced us outside into the light of the bloodmoon from time to time, retching, to gulp fresh air. As we worked, Elliot, for the most part, was possessed of a strange cheer – though the sound was smothered by the gag, he looked to be chuckling, and he mugged, made faces even as we sawed. However, a few times, when the blade snagged, I saw that shred of agonised and frightened humanity return briefly to his eyes; those moments were truly harrowing.

Reader, I am sorry to leave a gap your mind may plug, against your will, with a hyperbole of gory details, but I cannot bring myself to limn in any greater detail the horrors of that time.

Once Claire and I were done, we left to go look for something to carry Elliot's sundered parts in.<sup>6</sup>

Going out into the enclosure, we had a scout around. We found two satchels next to a woodpile behind the cabin, but they were not large enough for our purposes. Then we entered Elliot's living quarters. It was clear he was a sloven, for the floor was strewn untidily with weapons – daggers, swords, axes, clubs, and maces; implements of torture – wicked hooks, needles, thumbscrews, and other contraptions whose intricacies defy description (though there is one I can give a name to: sewn onto one of its leather restraints was a scrap of cloth

embroidered with the words ‘Ouroboros Apparatus’); and sundry other items – including a number of whetstones for honing blades.<sup>7</sup>

Though immoderate in depravity and cruelty, it seems Elliot had been in other ways ascetic, for there was little in the way of personal comforts in the cabin – his bed was a straw-stuffed mattress on an iron cot; he ate out of a plain wooden bowl with a tarnished pewter spoon; and the only foodstuff to be found was a sack of meal.

In a corner of the hut we came across a large carpet bag which I picked up. We then returned to the round house, and, on entering, began gathering up Elliot’s butchered pieces and stuffing them into the bag. This was no easy task as, though severed, the limbs writhed, struggled. When I seized the head I nearly dropped it, repulsed, for its eyes moved still in their sockets and its jaws and lips worked. I believe it sought to speak, lopped and gagged though it was.<sup>8</sup>

Inside the carpet bag there had been a smaller holdall. Into this I placed the typewriter and – after spending some time smoothing out its pages and binding them again with the discarded length of string – my manuscript. Then we set off. Feeling sore sullied, the first thing we did was go down to the river and wash.

#### XIV

By that thing we did, we have gained a reprieve. It has come at great cost to our repose, however – very often one or both of us will wake up perspiring, in the dead of night, from a nightmare in which we hear once more the hacking whoops of the rusty sawblade. We have no idea how long this period free of cares, of pursuit, will last, though we did our best to ensure it was a good while – we left Elliot's limbs staked to the ground at the four corners of the British Isles for scavengers to get at; cast his torso into the sea over the edge of the south-east coast's white cliffs; and buried his head in London. Perhaps we should have dispersed him over a greater area, spread his gobbets throughout the globe, but we could not bear to tote those gruesome things long, and were, in any case, concerned they might, with time, put themselves back together again in the bag.

You may be wondering why we did not throw the pieces of Elliot on to a pyre and scatter the cinders. This did, in fact, occur to us, but on thrusting one of the arms into a campfire to ascertain whether it would burn up, we discovered that, though it did, it formed once more from ashes almost directly the flames were out, and lay incandescing amid the embers – it was as if the residual heat allowed for swift healing.

I believe the course we took was the best available to us, for all its horror. Indeed, there is even a small chance it will prove to have been not a provisional, but a final measure: though Elliot will, given time, be able to make himself whole once more, it is possible the end of the world will intervene – it is coming soon, of that I am sure, for the colours in the sky wax more lurid by the day.

On the morning of the second day out from the stockade, we encountered a herd of wild horses we found to be docile and happy to bear us; some soothing murmurings were all it took

to rouse the servitude that was in their blood. We selected the two strongest looking to be our mounts. This was providential – the journey would have been onerous else. As we rode Claire and I talked a great deal; our mute companionship of the previous few months burgeoned into friendship.

(Though I now know you, my love, are my hoped for reader, I trust you will understand if I continue to write as if for another who knows nothing of what has happened to us – I feel it will not be a complete account otherwise.)

We saved the head till last. Superstitiously believing there might be a kind of binding sorcery in interring the grisly thing there, we went to the square where the Nightingale had once, so long ago, stood. On entering the dismal stand of yews, we found William's skeleton – picked clean and scattered by rats. The rodents' gnawing teeth had graved curious designs on the bones – they looked like pieces of scrimshaw.

Taking turns, we delved a deep pit under the darkling branches with a spade we had found, I forget where; lumps of concrete and fibrous tangles of roots made digging hard. Once we were done, we opened the bag and took out Elliot's head. On the ride from Land's End, where we left the right leg, it had managed to rid itself of the gag. It worked its jaws, tongue, and lips; I would hazard Elliot was execrating us, though, as there was no sound bar the clacking of teeth, I cannot be sure. I picked up the head and dropped it into the hole, began to shovel dirt back on top of it. It continued to jabber soundlessly.<sup>1</sup>

Once the head was buried, Claire and I rode down to the Thames, the clattering of our horses' hooves raising tumultuous echoes from the walls of the buildings; it sounded as if a herd stampeded pell-mell through the narrow streets. On reaching the river, we made camp, cooked up and feasted upon some tasty victuals we had been saving for the occasion. It was a warm night, and after eating we sat on the remains of a concrete groyne, dangling our feet in the river and talking of our plans, something we had been reluctant to do till then lest such prematurity blight our endeavour. Overhead, wisps of cloud scudded across the face of the



welkin – glistening stars, moon like a broad grin. After I had extolled their many wonders for a time, I finally persuaded Claire we should travel to the lofty range where I had spent such a large part of my aeonial existence. We resolved to set out the following day. Before leaving London, we raided the stacks of the British Library, took with us as many books as we could carry.

After a long and arduous journey we arrived in the Himalayas. We have been here now for a number of years, dwelling in a cave high above the treeline. Over time we have made it homely – pelts are strewn about the floor, and there is a comfortable goat-hair pallet to sleep on. Little of event has occurred in the time we have been residing here, yet life is not dull: the prospect of hoar-capped peaks we have from the mouth of our cave still fills us with awe, and there is drama in the scenes we see almost daily when out foraging, or hunting – a raptor stooping down upon a hare; flights of cranes soaring overhead; a snow leopard stalking a herd of the sure-footed yak who graze the coarse grass of the steeps, biding its time, picking the right moment to spring; and the startling contrast of the blue of a pellucid mountain lake with the dark green of the firs whose branches droop down to sip its pure waters.

Furthermore, though this is a remote spot, and few travellers pass by, we are not lonely – Claire and I delight in each others' company, in fact, we have become lovers (at least, I trust you feel as I do). We are not completely starved of other social interaction in any case: a few times each year we descend to the lower slopes to trade for essentials – iron cooking vessels, spears, rice, and so forth – with the people who inhabit the settlements there. Sitting up late into the night with these friendly folk, drinking rice wine, and listening to their musicians play keening melodies on shawms, singing bells, and tanpura, is a great pleasure. On occasions I will join the band – my banjo with its eerie drone, like the burring of toads in a canebrake, and brittle tone, like a strong wind in reeds, does not sound out of place amid the eerie noises of the Himalayan instruments.

We have one sorrow only, Claire and I. Though my lack of virility was soon overcome, it would appear – whether as a consequence of our eldritch experiences and immortality, or for other more prosaic reasons – no children can come of our couplings.

And so, overturning all portents, there is a mostly-happy ending to this tale of misery and horror.

## XV

A few things remain to be told then my narrative will be complete. Though they concern events of which Claire, and not I, was the protagonist, she has said she cannot write of them herself – she found describing them once painful enough and is certain dredging them up a second time, in committing them to paper, would be too much, would be agony. She asserts, and I believe she is right, writing something down tears at the guts even more than giving utterance to it, for it takes extra consideration, thought.

However, she insists on my setting down these happenings. In part this is because she believes when she reads my third-person accounts, she will be able to convince herself their main actor was not she but another and thus, put them behind her (I hope, my love, this proves true). But she also has another, uncanny reason for desiring I limn one of these occurrences, a reason that will become clear in due course.

It was on a cold night during our trek to the Himalayas, out on the great pampas of central Europe, that Claire recounted these events to me. We were sat warming ourselves at a fire after eating dinner, pleasantly sated – the meal had been a hearty venison stew – and also a little fuddled – we had together knocked back most of a bottle of vodka I had found, some days earlier, incredibly still intact and unopened, in the cellar of a tumbledown house.

Emboldened by drink, I finally put some questions to Claire I had been burning to learn the answers to, but which I had hitherto not asked for fear of galling old sores. Of course, it turned out she had been waiting for just such an opportunity to relate certain things that befell her.

In reply to my gentle enquiries, she told me she had been expelled from the tribe for killing a senior clansman who had tried to force himself upon her. She greatly regretted it; he

had acted only according to the customs of the tribe, which permitted him, as a member of the council of elders, to take any lesser clan member, any time he pleased. Coming into Claire's tent one night while she was sleeping, this grizzled elder, soused on a potation brewed up from beetroot, had thrown himself down upon her. She, still entangled in Sleep's gossamer toils, had seized her blade and stabbed him in the neck. The clan were roused by his death rattle, and, discovering Claire with the bloody knife in her fist, went to attack her; she fled, outpaced them.

It was sheer chance she came across me the next day while I was bathing, she did not even know I was alive, let alone nearby; she had come to look over the Ark, having seen it before, and thinking it might make a good place to hide. She recognized my face, realised very quickly it was truly me, not Elliot in my guise. The fact I appeared to have no recollection of her bemused her at first, but she assumed (correctly, I may add) that my memory had fared worse than hers. She decided it was politic not to reveal herself to me, played the frightened native girl. Thinking it hazardous for us to be together in the one place, she ran away, concealed herself in a spinney not far off. However, when the natives subsequently discovered and bolted her, she made for the hulk, doubting there was anywhere else in the vicinity she could hole up. She thought, vaguely, she might, by some stratagem, be able to drive me off. But she was not fleet enough, the natives caught up with her, and, as I have already described, set about her. After I rescued her from this beating, she warmed to me, wondered whether there might not be greater safety in numbers after all, and decided to stay with me. She continued shamming the tribeswoman, though – she wished to keep as many trumps in her hand as she could.

That evening sitting by the campfire on the plains, I also questioned Claire about her later ordeal at the hands of the clan, after Elliot had returned her to them, left her to their rabid attentions, as a hunter might leave a rabbit to his hounds. She told me they had beaten her, tied her up for several hours, then dragged her, dazed, out on to the mud flats. Once there,

their chieftain had stabbed her in the heart, buried a ceremonial flint knife in her, and they had interred her in a deep pit. She then had burrowed her way back to the surface. It was a gruelling toil, took her many agonising hours. When she finally broke gasping from the sludge, she spotted, by the faint glow of a fire, the natives' camp nearby, and went to them seeking food and water. On sighting her approaching, they fled howling into the night; she presumed they had taken her for a revenant, which, of course, in a way, she was.

Finally, I asked Claire about that I had been most wary of broaching, but also most curious over – the ruse her twin had contrived, and which Elliot was taken in by. She sat quiet a moment, then shook her head, said, 'In truth, I was an only child.'

Agog, it was all I could do to stammer out, 'What?'

Claire smiled wanly.

'Perhaps, it is time for you to finally hear the story I went to the pub that evening so long ago to tell. Though it doesn't provide any answers in itself, I can't explain my theory of what happened without relating it first.'

And so it was, under a sky veiled with hazy cloud through which a bright sickle moon cut swathes, and with the sound of large animals, perhaps buffalo, or bears, moving about in the darkness beyond the circle of light thrown by our fire, I finally heard Claire's tale.

It was a strange story, close kin to those told on that long ago evening. Claire described to me how she had, a few short months before the night of the gathering in the Nightingale, been called to attend upon an elderly recluse, Joseph Curwen (this name, like those in the rest of this manuscript, is made up; Claire, having forgotten it, asked me to provide a fitting invention), a client of the firm of solicitors for whom she worked, who had suddenly been seized by a fear of dying intestate.<sup>1</sup> Apparently this gentleman had asked for Claire by name and, claiming he was housebound following a fall, requested she visit him at his residence, an isolated stone cottage in the Trossachs, north of Glasgow, to draft his will. Seeing nothing untoward in this, having met Curwen before and thought him a pleasant enough old man, a

little cantankerous maybe, Claire agreed to make the trip. She anticipated a pleasant afternoon – the country through which she would be driving was picturesque and the weather, good. Working up the testament would not take long, and she had high hopes she might receive a cup of tea and a slice of cake for her trouble.

Claire did receive the tea and cake after which she had hankered, but they were laced with a soporific. When she awoke from the blank slumbers the drug cast her into, she found herself in the lonely dwelling's large cellar, bound to a stake. There was a pentagram chalked around her on the flagstones with black wax candles guttering at each of its five points. She had been stripped of her clothes, and strange sigils had been daubed in blood on her breasts, belly, and limbs. Snakes' skeletons, strung along lengths of string, hung like swags from the walls – the bones had been phosphorus dipped and glowed eerily.

At first Claire thought the chamber was empty otherwise, but then, her eyes adjusting to the gloom, she noticed, in a tenebrous alcove on the other side of the cellar, behind a pillar, a looming gaunt form. At first Claire took it for a statue, perhaps an idol, but then she heard it moan, desolate and low, realised it was a living thing. She gasped. Lurching from the niche, tottering upright, this creature burst forth into the fitful candlelight, loped towards her. She glimpsed a rawboned beast, with pallid cankered flesh, spindly limbs, and a maw drivelling slobber, then the length of iron chain that tethered it, was attached to a studded leather collar round its neck, arrested its dart, choked and felled it, and, yowling, it scrabbled back into the nook on all fours, back arched, spine jutting, the links of the chain clattering behind. Claire's nostrils were mobbed by the stink of corruption.

Staring at the recess, every sinew taut with fright, Claire saw the creature's gnarled skull emerge slowly, warily, as it craned its neck to peer at her. Most of its face was cast in shade by the pillar, but a bar of light fell upon its right eye, and a portion of its tallowy forehead. The thing gazed at her for a long time, motionless; every aspect of that eye was graven on Claire's memory. It was filled with primordial malice, had a palsied, drooping, upper lid, a

white jaundiced and laced with skeins of blood, like the smear of a pulped fecundated egg, and, set in this mess, a pitchy, speckled iris, a coal seam in which flecks of mica glistened, with, at its heart, a sliver of pupil, blacker still, a fissure opening on the abyss.

After a time, Claire, helpless with terror, pissed; the urine trickled down the inside of her legs. The thing nodded its head, gurgled mirthfully, lasciviously, then ducked back into the alcove, was still and silent again.

Once Claire had recovered from the terrible shock, she tested her bonds. She found that, though they held firm, they had not been tied quite tight enough, and, after several hours struggling, she was able to wriggle free. During this time the creature did not emerge from the niche again, but every so often she heard it shuffle and the chain that secured it clank. When Curwen came in to sacrifice her, clutching a curved dagger and grimoire, she was able to overpower him, and run into the night. A local farmer, up early to milk his herd, saw her fleeing, frantic, naked, across his field, caught up with her, gave her his coat, and took her back to his house to be looked after by his wife. When Claire had recovered a little, she told the couple her tale, leaving nothing out, though she painted the thing in the nook as a filthy starveling bestial man, for fear they might think her deranged. They were inclined to believe her – local rumours circulated about eerie noises emanating from the hermit's farmhouse and strange flickering lights seen in its windows at night – and called the local constable immediately. By the time the policeman reached the cottage, Curwen had fled, but the weird scene in the cellar confirmed Claire's account. Of course, the demon, or whatever it was, was also gone. When the police subsequently scoured the property for anything else untoward, they were horrified to discover a large number of human bone fragments mixed in with the soil of Curwen's kitchen garden. He had apparently ground up the bodies of many victims, and perhaps, it was speculated, used the meal to nourish the earth in which he grew his vegetables and herbs.<sup>2</sup>

When Claire finished telling me her story, she was shaking. I reached out to take her in my arms, but she gently pushed me away.

‘It’s fine. It was such a long time ago. It’s just, well, this is the first time I’ve thought about it for centuries.’

Shuddering, she wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

‘I kept my description of my trials brief because I’ve no wish to relive that terrible night. Still, though, I wish you to set them down as I have told you of them. It should be enough to warn me.’

Drunk, I merely nodded absently.

Then, I reached for the vodka, and stopped, my hand only halfway to the bottle.

‘Enough to warn you?’

‘Oh, I don’t know.’

She picked up the bottle herself, took a swig from it, then held it arms length, peering blearily at it.

‘We’re going to feel dreadful in the morning, you know.’

‘I know.’

She passed the vodka to me, then sat silent a short time, biting her lower lip.

‘Well?’ I prompted.

‘I’m not really sure. All I know is your manuscript had something to do with the fact Elliot was convinced he saw me pass the way of all mortal flesh.’

‘What? How?’

‘I’ll try my best to explain.’

She told me that, throughout that night in the Trossachs farmhouse, a tenuous memory of having before read an account of the things she was undergoing, had occasionally flitted through her mind. At the time, of course, floundering in a morass of horror, she gave it scant



thought. Afterwards, when she mused on it, she ascribed it to that uncanny sense of having lived through something once before, which is not uncommon.

But when she looked over the narrative I was composing, after I had taken her aboard the Ark, she had a recollection of having previously perused it, several weeks prior to her horrific encounter with the evil diabolist Curwen. She vaguely remembered finding it in a second-hand bookshop in London, during a trip she had made to the capital – the same typewritten manuscript, though bound into a cloth cover. Yet, strangely, at the same time she also felt certain she had never seen it before.

It was Elliot's talk of watching her age and die that had suggested a possible explanation for this bizarre sensation – she must, at some point, have been split into two separate selves whose life paths had bifurcated. Therefore, while she agreed to visit Curwen to draft his will, endured the terrors of his cellar, responded to my classified, attended the gathering in the Nightingale, and so on, her fetch, who had read my account, refused to drive out to the isolated farmhouse, never saw the horror that lurks beneath the mundane surface of things, and lived out a normal existence.<sup>3</sup>

'I envy her,' she said, almost in tears.

'I'm glad things turned out the way they did, though,' I said, hoping to give her cheer.

'The most confusing thing is that, had I read your story, I would not have been lumbered with immortality, and could not have rescued you from death at Elliot's hand. Had I not rescued you, even allowing for Elliot's not burning the manuscript for some reason of his own, and it slipping backwards through time so I could read it, you would never have recorded my tale. Perhaps it is that very paradox that divided me.'

We both sat in silence awhile, staring into the dying embers of our fire. My brain reeled.

'Anyhow,' Claire continued, eventually. 'I lied to Elliot, told him I'd had a twin because I didn't want him to suspect any of this. It just felt like it might be important to keep him in ignorance. Not that I can make any sense of what happened.'

‘Neither can I. Though it isn’t any stranger than anything else that’s befallen us, is it?’

## Epilogue

This will be hard going. It has been a very long time since I last used this typewriter. I have though, meanwhile, taken good care of it: protected it from dust, grime, and moisture with a cover made from the stomach membrane of a yak – a fine but impermeable stuff – kept it oiled, wiped it regularly with a soft cloth. I felt sure, you see, I would have cause to use it again, that I would be compelled by some happening of moment to set its typebars clattering once more, jostling its ribbon up against a sheet of paper clamped against its platen. Its mechanisms are therefore in good working order. What, then, will make writing this epilogue a slow and laborious task is that my fingers, out of the habit of typing, are clumsy and halting, and my brain, long unused to composition, struggles to find the words I need; though this latter hindrance is, to an extent, alleviated by the fact the view from the mouth of this cave, my home, in which I sit writing, is an inspiring one – the steeps are swathed in unsullied snow, and overhead the grey canopy is breaking up to reveal a sickly sun and a wan sliver of moon hanging in a sky bestrewn with bright stars of varied hues, a sight which, for all it is an ill omen, is sublime.

I feel sure I am correct in describing this scene in the welkin as an evil portent for, though the end of things has been much longer coming than I prophesied when I wrote the manuscript to which this will serve as an afterword – Claire and I have lived many centuries in our Himalayan retreat – and the signs I noted then merely betokened the onset of a drawn out senescence, not imminent death throes, it seems almost certain the last days are now truly upon us: the sun, after waxing until, several hundred years ago, it was a blinding furnace whose rays scorched the earth, has dwindled, is now a sickly orb, no brighter than the moon in former times, and the earth grows cold and dark.

I have, as a consequence, spent many hours lost in quiet contemplation in recent months, musing on the ultimate condition of things. I have become convinced the world, indeed the universe, is, every once in a great many ages, consumed by fire, then rises from the cinders in its primordial state. In forming this notion I have of course been influenced by the cosmology of the peoples of this mountainous region. I do not believe, however, as some thinkers of past ages have supposed, the cosmos is renewed to always experience the same history over again: Claire's uncanny feeling she was sundered in two – perhaps on reading this manuscript – had a fetch who experienced an existence that diverged from hers, has suggested another possibility to me. I think the earth, on being reborn, may sometimes undergo a history minutely at variance with that of the one which preceded it, and speculate the agents of any permutations that might occur are objects which survive the cataclysm and, persisting into the next cycle of existence, set up eddies in the stream of time. Though the cosmos is perhaps resistant to such changes, especially those that give rise to paradoxes, I would conjecture the potential for transformation remains. I have, therefore, become determined to somehow preserve this account of mine.<sup>1</sup>

To this end, I resolved to speak with a man I have met and discoursed with on a number of occasions, a roving holy man widely thought hereabouts to possess prodigious powers. I, myself, have witnessed him apparently bring back to health those seemingly beyond all hope, dispel a fungus blighting a field of rice, and create, by mumbling some words over a line he scratched in the dirt with his toe, a sorcerous barrier that seemed to keep a village from being burnt to the ground by a raging forest fire. Of course, it was this last miracle about which I wished to speak with him.

Therefore, when Claire and I went down the mountain a week ago, lugging the furs of a number of beasts we had caught in our traps over the previous few months, to trade them for rice, iron arrowheads, and other necessities, I made enquiries as to the whereabouts of the thaumaturge. I was told he had taken sick and returned to the settlement of his forefathers.

After we set out for this village, the weather turned inclement, and, as our path took us through a defile where snow drifted waist high, we were sore weary and had painful chilblains on our hands and feet by the time we arrived. Thus, it was not until the following morning, when I was recovered from the trudge, rested, and warm, I sought out the holy man.

Leaving Claire drowsing in the hide tent we had been offered for the night by a kindly villager who had taken pity on us, I made my way to the rough-stone sod-covered hut in which, I had been informed, the holy man was convalescing. The storm had abated, and at first I was glad. I soon, however, found myself wishing for its bluster – the snow and the thick dark clouds mustered low overhead muffled every noise and it was eerily quiet.

On reaching the lowly dwelling to which I had been directed, I was saddened to learn the holy man was, contrary to what I had been told, close to death. His family sat sunk in sorrow in the entrance chamber, and were loath to let me enter the inner room in which he lay confined to his bed. However, he heard my voice through the drapery of bearskin hanging in the doorway, recognised it, and called out in a reedy tone for them to admit me. They did so, but, before I went in, pleaded with me not to tax the holy man's waning vigour.

Inside the dank and dingy room, I saw him lying, gaunt and wan, laden with furs. He turned to greet me with a wave of his hand, then, suffering pangs, sat up clawing at his coverings, and moaned low. Then the spasm fled, and he slumped back down.

I was moved to see him like that and asked him if he could not be healed either by his own magic, or by the remedies of others. Shaking his head slowly and smiling, wan, he told me the span he had been allotted was drawing to a close, and that he was well-prepared for the end. I did not attempt to press him to seek a cure, knowing from past experience he was stubborn.

He gestured for me to take a seat on a three-legged wooden stool that had been drawn up by his bedside. We talked for a short while about the weather and mutual acquaintances, then the holy man began to tell me of his concerns about the cranes. The numbers of these birds

flying over the mountain range in autumn and spring had been growing fewer and fewer each year, and hunters were now wary of shooting many down, lest their extinction be hastened. The flesh of the birds having been one of the staple foodstuffs of the Himalayan people's winter diet, this had led to much hunger and misery.

This matter served as a natural preamble for the topic I wished to broach. I described to the holy man my notion that the end of days drew near, and outlined my, admittedly oxymoronic, thesis of eternal recurrence with variation. Listening, he nodded sagely.

'In dreams,' he said, 'I have seen the world wither and watched its cold dead husk rolling through the void, so thought the end merely the end. But maybe the meaning of this vision is that, with these permutations of which you speak, the cosmos, with unimaginable slowness, cycles through all possible histories. Maybe existence is like that game, we in these parts call "Climb the Mountain", whose players take turns to roll a die, aiming to be the first to throw all the scores printed on its sides.'

'But who, in that case, gambles with our lives?'

'Perhaps it is but the Void, and his friends Desolation and Emptiness.'

As our talk was beginning to tire him, I thought it would be prudent to raise the subject of his warding incantation. At first he was bemused. Then, when he realised I hoped to preserve a written account of key moments of my life through the cataclysm I believed impending, he looked at me sharply.

'I did not take you for a prideful man.'

'Let me explain. It is not vanity that leads me to seek to do this. If my tale is found and read, it might impede, in the world that is to come, the nefarious meddling of an evil being who has brought misery to many.'

I gave a brief account of the things of which this narrative treats.

When I had finished the holy man said, his voice a hoarse croak, 'That explains the things that are whispered about you. I thought them mere superstition before. I will help you, as best

I can. Perhaps that is the true meaning of my dream, that I am meant, with the last of my fading strength, to aid you to gamble with history.'

Taking one of his limp, fervid hands in mine, I thanked him.

'There is something else. Another vision I have had. I thought it merely an aguish nightmare before, but now after hearing your tale...' he broke off, spluttering weakly. I started from the stool in concern, but he motioned me to sit back down with a wave of his hand, took up a rag, hawked, and spat a dark clot into it. He groaned, then went on.

'In this dream I saw the headless body of an elderly man scrabbling at the earth beneath a canopy of dark and gnarled branches.'

I shuddered.

At that moment, one of the holy man's sons came in, imploring me not to keep his father from sleep any longer. The holy man looked up at him.

'I will rest in a moment, but there is something I must explain to my friend first.'

I left the holy man's hut a little after this, clutching a large cloth bag. He has directed me to put my manuscript in it, seal it up, and bring it back to him so he can cast a charm upon it. He exhorted me to haste, feeling he did not have much time left. After I had located Claire – she was breakfasting with some villagers – and related to her what had passed, we returned here, and I sat down at my typewriter to compose this epilogue.

So now it comes time to finally conclude this memoir. Once I have sealed this manuscript in the sack the holy man gave me and taken it to him to be enchanted, it may not be opened again, for to do so would break the charm. When I asked him what I should do with it afterwards, he told me it did not really matter, but suggested I might bury it. After some thought, I have decided I will leave it in the stacks of the British Library, beneath London's desolate streets; I feel this will make a fitting resting place.

Besides, we have another reason to return to that city. When I told Claire of the holy man's vision she suggested we go there with all haste, to either prevent Elliot from putting

himself back together again, or, should we be too late, find him and attempt once more to best him, rather than live in fear of his hunting us down. I agreed with this course: though I am resigned to death in the great conflagration that is coming – for all that, since meeting Claire, I no longer wish for an end to my life – I desire the short time that remains to me be as tranquil as possible.

This, then, is the end of my story. Claire, I hope you will forgive me if, while in my heart I inscribe it to you, formally I dedicate it to the hoped for, though doubtless chimeric reader who has been so faithful to me (who may perhaps be your future self). Reader, if you do indeed exist, you must live on a new earth, one sprouted from the ashes of this. I am sure it will be a world in which good and ill vie for dominance, just as they did on this one; I urge you to learn to distinguish between them, be vigilant, nurture the good, and stifle the ill.

But I have waxed sententious. I must now curtail these foolish ramblings and place this manuscript in the sack the holy man gave me. After I have done so, Claire and I will climb to the summit of a local peak to spend some time contemplating the welkin's tapestry, and telling each other stories of the things we see sketched there in the patterns of the stars, fleshing out the tales of our private sidereal mythology, a common pastime of ours. Then we will leave behind this cave in which we have spent so many happy centuries and, after visiting the holy man on his deathbed, strike out from the Himalayas, heading north-west, on what will likely be our final journey. I am homeward bound once again.<sup>2</sup>



## Explanatory Notes

### Title Page

<sup>1</sup> *The Wanderer*: The title is an explicit reference to Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), a novel that was an avowed favourite of Peterkin's. The influence of *Melmoth* reverberates throughout *The Wanderer*: in its narrative structure, its prose, its denouncement of the mechanisms by which institutions compel belief, and its depiction of diabolically prolonged lifespans. Any reader interested in fully unravelling Peterkin's intentions in *The Wanderer* is advised to read Maturin's book.

*A True Narrative*: This subtitle is one of many claims to veracity that riddle *The Wanderer*. These repeated insinuations are countered by self-evidently fictitious passages, the effect being to make the novel a discursive space in which notions of truth and belief are in flux and under interrogation (see Introduction, 'A Discussion of the Text').

### Epigraph and Dedication

<sup>1</sup> *Goin' [...] a-way*: This epigraph is taken from the North American folktune 'Going Down the Road Feeling Bad' (which also exists in a number of other variants, including, 'Blowing Down this Road', and 'Old Dusty Road'). The song has had a diverse history since its earliest commercial release in 1923, being performed by a variety of different artists, including Woody Guthrie, whose version played a large part in popularising it. It was frequently recorded in the 1920s and '30s by hillbilly artists such as Henry Whitter, Ernest Stoneman, and Fiddlin' John Carson, and its wide dissemination during that period is suggestive of currency in the oral tradition. However, its origins are lost to history, though its roots may

well have been in African-American tradition: Guthrie claims, in the introduction to his Library of Congress recording of it, that it was derived from the plaint of an escaping slave.

In the 1930s and '40s the song became the lament of the vilified 'Okies' who, forced off their farms by foreclosure and dust storms during the Great Depression, migrated west to California, which they imagined a land of plenty, only to find there hardship and closed hearts.

This may explain Peterkin's attraction to it as an epigraph. The story of the exodus of indigent farmers from the Dust Bowl, their settling in California, and their vilification by their reluctant Golden State hosts is a historical exemplum of the plight of the dispossessed.

The song is performed in *The Wanderer* by the novel's unnamed narrator.

*To the hoped for, though doubtless chimeric reader:* This dedication is the first of many addresses by the narrator-protagonist to a hypothetical, but fervently-desired reader. These are one of a number of devices that function to give *The Wanderer* the uncanny aura of a found manuscript.

## Prologue

<sup>1</sup> *The light of civilisation has long since departed this place:* The setting of *The Wanderer's* frame narrative is heavily indebted to that of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899); Marlow spins his yarn aboard the *Nellie* which floats, at anchor, on the lower reaches of the Thames. This particular phrase would seem to refer to Marlow's observation, referring to the lands through which the great river runs, that they had once 'been one of the dark places of the earth,' (Conrad, 1995a, p.49).

*Heart of Darkness* is a crucial intertext for *The Wanderer*: the former novel is echoed in the latter's themes, narrative structure and mode, as well as in specific references. The description, in *Heart of Darkness*, of Marlow's storytelling style is also relevant – for him 'the

meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine,' (Conrad, 1995a, p.50). Likewise, *The Wanderer*'s meanings are oblique, diffuse, thrown into faint relief by the murky light of the text, not hatched from it like a brood of chicks from a clutch of eggs.

<sup>2</sup> *a name [...] there*: Here both the decay of words' powers to represent, and their incantatory aspect, are combined in one figure (see Introduction, 'A Discussion of the Text').

<sup>3</sup> *mettlesome*: This is one of many terms with an archaic feel that are scattered through *The Wanderer*. Their purpose is unclear. Possibly they were intended to give the protagonist a musky tone – something one might expect of a writer who has lived for millennia.

Peterkin does not, strangely, employ the standard science-fiction trope of using neologisms to indicate the development and transformation of language over the time interceding between the time of writing and the epoch in which the book is set. This is perhaps because he wanted to suggest the narrator was writing so as to be comprehended by an audience of the era in which he was born. Or maybe because, as is made clear in the Prologue, for the purpose of his novel Peterkin hypothesised that the English language would not last long after the current epoch.

<sup>4</sup> *Buddhism*: Allusions to the tenets of Buddhism are scattered throughout the novel. Though T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) is a primary intertext for *The Wanderer*, Peterkin does not follow Eliot in deploying Eastern philosophies and religions to illustrate the comparative decadence of the Western metaphysic. Nor is Buddhism viewed as an ethos that can provide the transcendence sought by those wishing to flee the cult of materialism, a notion at the heart of certain Western liberal ideologies. Instead *The Wanderer*'s references to the philosophy would seem to constitute a plea to seek a means – in embracing forms of otherness – of averting epistemological crisis.

<sup>5</sup> *I can [...] universe*: Here a teleological view of history is contrasted with a more cyclical model. The main reference would appear to be Buddhist notions of the circle of existence, though other theories are relevant (see Introduction, ‘A Discussion of the Text’).

<sup>6</sup> *These fragments I will shore against my ruins*: This is *The Wanderer*’s sole (almost) direct quotation of Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. The poem, however, haunts the novel, is present in its despair and insinuations of cultural decay. In contrast to *The Waste Land* though, *The Wanderer* is suffused with an optimism that cultural decline can be arrested.

<sup>7</sup> As a number of indicators in this ‘Preface’ suggest, and as will become clearer later in the narrative, Peterkin intended the reader to construe *The Wanderer* as a text written at some unspecified time in the far-flung future, on a decaying earth. A revelation of the reasons why it exists at a time before it has been written constitute the dénouement of the narrative. There are fictional antecedents for the idea of the presentation of a document from a remote posterior age, most notably Gene Wolfe’s *The Book of the New Sun* (1980, 1981, 1981, 1983). An appendix to the first volume of this tetralogy, *The Shadow of the Torturer* (1980), playfully shams as a note, written by Wolfe, on the translation of the tale, which, he claims, was ‘originally composed in a tongue that has not yet achieved existence,’ (1994b, p.211). *The Book of the New Sun* differs from *The Wanderer* in its suggestion that the future manuscript has returned against the flow of time; *The Wanderer*, as will be seen, postulates a different means by which such a document might be found in the present.

## I

<sup>1</sup> *I have [...] tortuous*: cf. the eponymous narrator’s assertion in Sterne’s *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (1759-1767) that, ‘of all the several ways of beginning a book which are now in practice throughout the known world, I am confident my own way of doing it is the best – I’m sure it is the most religious – for I begin with writing the first sentence –

and trusting to the Almighty God for the second,' (1986, p.516). The suggestion of *The Wanderer* is that language is insufficient for the representation of events and things, and that those who would write must proceed on their own, for there are no higher powers to come to their aid.

## II

<sup>1</sup> *The Lost World*: Arthur Conan Doyle's tale of adventure (1912). For analysis of the relevance of this text to the themes and form of *The Wanderer* see the introduction, 'A Discussion of the Text'.

*Edgar Allan Poe*: The impact of Poe's writing upon Peterkin's fictions was immense. In 'The Infinite Library' (1992) Peterkin stated, 'I first realised that I wanted to write when I read Poe's 'The Masque of the Red Death', (2000c, p.82). Peterkin addressed the influence in a number of his other works, including, most directly, the tale 'Reynolds' in *The Black Arts* (1999) which deals with the events of Poe's last hours.

<sup>2</sup> *'The Angel of the Odd'*: This short story (1844) describes the narrator's encounter, while in a drunken stupor, with the eponymous entity, a creature described as follows:

His body was a wine-pipe, or a rum-puncheon, or something of that character, and had a truly Falstaffian air. In its nether extremity were inserted two kegs, which seemed to answer all the purposes of legs. For arms there dangled from the upper portion of the carcass two tolerably long bottles, with the necks outward for hands. All the head that I saw the monster possessed of was one of those Hessian canteens which resemble a large snuff-box with a hole in the middle of the lid. This canteen (with a funnel on its top, like a cavalier cap slouched over the eyes) was set on edge upon the puncheon, with the hole toward myself; and through this hole, which seemed puckered up like the mouth of a very precise old maid, the creature was

emitting certain rumbling and grumbling noises which he evidently intended for intelligible talk. (1978a, p.1102)

The Angel announces in his heavy-accented tones that he is the ‘the genius who preside[s] over the contretemps of mankind, and whose business it [i]s to bring about the odd accidents which are continually astonishing the skeptic,’ (Poe, 1978a, p.1104). He has manifested himself before the narrator because the latter has scoffed at the likelihood of such strange coincidences after reading a report in a newspaper of an uncanny death which he believes ‘a poor hoax,’ (Poe, 1978a, p.1101). The protagonist pays scant attention to the Angel’s discourse, his contempt, after a time, driving the odd creature away. As a punishment, the avatar of chance then subjects him to an increasingly absurd series of trials.

This tale is perhaps alluded to by Peterkin as comic parallel to the narrative of *The Wanderer*. It also resonates with the theme of drunken delusions that runs through the novel.

<sup>3</sup> *the Nightingale*: This is a real public house near Borough tube station. However, a reference to the classical myth of Tereus, Procne, and Philomela, is presumably intended (see Introduction, ‘A Discussion of the Text’).

<sup>4</sup> ‘*MS. Found in a Bottle*’: The short story by Poe (1833) is relevant to *The Wanderer* primarily in the manner in which it is presented as a found document.

<sup>5</sup> ‘*The Sphinx*’: This short tale by Poe (1846) is story of the triumph of reason over superstition. In it the morbid narrator’s vision of a fearsome behemoth ponderously clambering up a distant hillside, which he takes to be a harbinger of his death, is revealed, by a clear-headed friend, to be accountable by his having seen a tiny moth climbing a gossamer thread hanging before the window.

This relates to *The Wanderer*’s trope of visual delusions, and indicates, ironically, the impossibility of rationalising the novel’s many eldritch happenings.

<sup>6</sup> *It would [...] spaces*: cf. the narrators of H.P. Lovecraft's 'The Lurking Fear' and 'Pickman's Model' who similarly become terrified of subways, cellars and so forth after dreadful underground experiences. As David L. Pike notes in *Subterranean Cities: The World Beneath Paris and London, 1800-1945* (2005), the 'antiseptic promises of a perfectly controlled new underground' made by the forces of technocratic rationality in the nineteenth century, are always compromised by the fact that '[w]hat remains consistently diabolical, whatever the discourse of evil, is the note of excess that haunts the view from below,' (pp.5, 11).

<sup>7</sup> *The Sphinx of the Ice-Fields*: Jules Verne's novel of 1897 (original French title, *Le Sphinx des glaces*). This is one of three alterations to the manuscript. The name of the book present in the typed draft here has been blotted out by thick hatching, and in Peterkin's hand, just above, the title of Verne's work has been inserted. It is not possible to make out the original reference, Peterkin's heavy erasure has obliterated it.

*The Sphinx of the Ice-Fields* is a sequel to and re-imagining of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838), a novel Peterkin was fond of and whose title is interpolated in a similar fashion later in the manuscript.

Strangely, given that there are a number of similarities between their oeuvres, Peterkin was not fond of Verne's writings, claiming he found the French writer's 'scientism [...] bereft of all poetry,' (2000c, p.85). This allusion is, therefore, something of a puzzle.

<sup>8</sup> There are no real life authors whose life or works fit the descriptions given here and later in *The Wanderer* of those of Jane Ellis. Peterkin tended not to found the characters in his works on real individuals. Arguably, this was his greatest failing – as a consequence his books are peopled only with unconvincing stock cut-outs and thinly veiled versions of himself.

### That's the Way to Do It!

<sup>1</sup> *The wolves are coming back*: cf. the affinity between wolves and the diabolical that exists in many folk tales and Gothic texts. A specific reference to the werewolf narratives of Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), may be intended.

<sup>2</sup> *At the Mountains of Madness*: A novel by H.P. Lovecraft, composed in 1931. This is the second of Peterkin's changes to the manuscript, again the original title is heavily crossed out and illegible.

Lovecraft's novel, like *The Wanderer*, masquerades as an authentic tale, an account of a scientific expedition to the Antarctic that is stricken by tragedy when the party awakes, from their millennial sleep, some olden entities from far-distant cosmic reaches. There are other similarities between the works too, but still, the allusion is puzzling, for Peterkin was not a great admirer of Lovecraft.

<sup>3</sup> *swazzle*: A Punch and Judy man's swazzle (or swatchel) is a device made of two bowed strips of metal that are bound together by a length of cotton tape to form an eye shape. The ribbon also passes between the strips, from corner to corner of the 'eye'. Held in the mouth, pressed against the palate by the tongue, the vibrations of this cotton 'reed' produce the distinctive harsh, rasping voice of Punch when the performer speaks.

<sup>4</sup> While out walking in the West End this afternoon, I came across, on Panton Street, a Punch and Judy fit-up that bore an eerie resemblance to this depiction. There was no show in progress, in fact the booth was empty. I hung around to see if any one would turn up to put on a performance, but it was cold, and I gave up waiting after fifteen minutes or so. When I passed by an hour later, the fit-up had gone. I can only assume that Peterkin must have seen it and based his limning on it.

<sup>5</sup> The references to the Punch and Judy tradition that occur throughout this first inset tale no doubt spring from the childhood fear of Punch that Peterkin discusses in the essay 'My



Bugbears' (1992). They also serve to invite parallels between the far-flung future setting of *The Wanderer*'s frame narrative and Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker* (1980).

<sup>6</sup> *mausoleum* – This is Peterkin's invention – there are not, in truth, any mausolea in Christ Church's small churchyard.

<sup>7</sup> *obtrusive*: cf. the 'hyper-obtrusive situation,' of the purloined letter in Edgar Allan Poe's short story of that name (1844) (1978g, p.991).

<sup>8</sup> *I began [...] claws*: Here – briefly, while the protagonist wonders whether his horrific experience was, in truth, a figment – a vacillation between a rational and a supernatural interpretation of events arises. It is upon just such a crux that Tzvetan Todorov's model of the fantastic, advanced in *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (1970, original French title, *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*), is predicated. But in *The Wanderer* it is dismissed with a swiftness that is almost derisory. Peterkin concurred with Todorov's thesis that fantastic hesitation had potency only under particular epistemological conditions that had long been surpassed. He thought contemporary fictions that retained the trope were regressive, essentially antiquated. Fantastic hesitation exposed a lie at the heart of nineteenth century empirical discourses, but the project of contestational literature in the twentieth century is to demonstrate that all representation has become problematic, even impossible. The thing of horror should no longer be held in abeyance by irresolution, but must become what Peterkin termed a 'voracious fantastic' that corrupts the text and even reaches out beyond the borders of the text to disturb the reader. This idea resonates with Todorov's notion of 'a [twentieth-century,] *generalized fantastic* which swallows up the entire world of the book and the reader along with it,' (1980, p.174).

<sup>9</sup> While trawling through local London newspapers for the months immediately following Peterkin's disappearance, seeking accounts of any persons going missing under similar strange circumstances, I have discovered reports detailing a few brutal murders bearing a strong similarity to those described here. It was not the 'spate' Peterkin evokes – there were

only four victims, and no link between the killings appears to have been made – but still, it is unsettling. It must, however, be mere coincidence.

<sup>10</sup> *Blind Willie Johnson*: Accounted by some the greatest of all African-American recording artists of the 1920s and '30s, Blind Willie Johnson was a gospel musician, who never, as far as is known, sang any secular songs. But his approach to making music – singing solo, or with a female backing vocalist, accompanied only by his guitar – his raucous, deep voice, his driving, strident picking, and sensitive, lyrical slide solos, have tended to associate him with the blues artists of the period.

### III

<sup>1</sup> *Apart [...] contemplation*: cf. Jorge Luis Borges's short story 'The Immortal' (1949) which seems to have been Peterkin's model for the description of a preternaturally prolonged existence. The following passage is particularly relevant here:

The body, for them [the immortals], was a submissive domestic animal and it sufficed to give it, every month, the pittance of a few hours of sleep, a bit of water and a scrap of meat. Let no one reduce us to the status of ascetics. There is no pleasure more complex than that of thought and we surrendered ourselves to it. At times, an extraordinary stimulus would restore us to the physical world. (1970b, p.145)

<sup>2</sup> *adversity [...] wings*: cf. Sir Thomas Browne's *Hydriotaphia* (1658), 'Adversity stretcheth our dayes, misery makes *Alcmenas* nights, and time hath no wings unto it,' (1977a, p.307). In his essay, 'The Infinite Library', Peterkin states, of Browne, 'It is not for the sense I read him, which I apprehend only in meagre morsels, but for the writing alone. For me, reading his

prose is like drinking strong coffee, it fogs the mind, but is redolent and has a rich savour,' (2000c, p.78).

### The Lamia

<sup>1</sup> *The Lamia*: In Greek mythology Lamia was the daughter of Poseidon and Lybie, beloved of Zeus. When Hera discovered his infatuation she took Lamia's children from her, and, wracked by a terrible grief, Lamia turned to murdering children, became a monster. However, Peterkin's allusion here is to John Keat's poem 'Lamia' (1820) which tells of a young man, Lycius, who unwittingly falls in love with a serpent who has been transformed into a beautiful young woman.

<sup>2</sup> *At its heart [...] swiftly off*: cf. the conclusion to Peterkin's first novel *The Changeling*.

<sup>3</sup> *Upon reflection [...] knowledge*: See introduction, 'A Discussion of the Text'.

<sup>4</sup> *The cat [...] gallows*: cf. Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Black Cat' (1843).

### V

<sup>1</sup> The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket: The third of Peterkin's changes to the manuscript. His pen was, it seems, pressed against the page with excessive force while he scored out the original title – the nib of his pen has perforated the paper in places.

Like *The Wanderer*, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, Edgar Allan Poe's sole novel-length work, masquerades as a true story, the first portion written by Poe from the account of the eponymous protagonist, and the remainder recounted by Pym himself. Though some contemporary readers believed the novel to be an authentic travelogue, in consonance with *The Wanderer*, it constantly, playfully, undermines its own credence:

One consideration that deterred me [from writing a public narrative] was, that, having kept no journal during a greater portion of the time in which I was absent, I feared I should not be able to write, from mere memory, a statement so minute and connected as to have the *appearance* of that truth it would really possess, barring only the natural and unavoidable exaggeration to which all of us are prone when detailing events which have had powerful influence in exciting the imaginative faculties. (Poe, 1999, p.3)

The protagonist of this novel is in some ways a fictional avatar for Poe himself, and the syllabic resonance between the names ‘Arthur Gordon Pym’ and ‘Edgar Allan Poe’ is striking and apparent. Indeed, one of the many conjectures constellating around Poe’s enigmatic end is that he imagined, while he lay moribund in a hospital bed on the night before his death, that he was Pym, reliving in his imagination an episode from the novel in which the protagonist is imprisoned in the hold of a ship, oppressed and sickened by a miasma (see Peterkin’s short fiction ‘Reynolds’).

<sup>2</sup> Not all of the conceptions of civilisation that the narrator reflects upon here suggest the notions of a particular thinker, though some do. The following is a tentative list of the theoreticians that appear, implicitly at least, to be referred to:

*the foundation [...]* God: St Augustine of Hippo.

*one stage [...]* history: Giambattista Vico.

*an instrument [...]* exploitation: Karl Marx.

*a decadent [...]* man’s: Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

*Civilisation [...]* existence: The narrator will later, seemingly, retract the dark vision he offers here.

<sup>3</sup> *time [...]* monument: cf. Sir Thomas Browne’s *Hydriotaphia*: ‘Time, which antiquates antiquities, and hath an art to make dust of all things, hath yet spared these *minor* monuments,’ (1977a, p.306).

<sup>4</sup> *the muddled [...] soil*: The source of this image would seem to be the following verses from Ted Hughes's poem 'Littleblood' from the cycle *Crow* (1970):

O littleblood, little boneless little skinless  
 Ploughing with a linnet's carcase  
 Reaping the wind and threshing the stones (1972, p.89)

### **One Moment Knelled the Woe of Years**

<sup>1</sup> *One Moment [...] Years*: The title of this inset tale is a quotation taken from Robert Browning's poem "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" (1855). The influence of this antic, chimerical work, avowedly conceived in an ecstasy, reverberates throughout Jane's macabre tale. In 'The Infinite Library', Peterkin describes the poem as, 'a malefic arcanum [...] suffused with eldritch foreboding,' (2000, p.87).

<sup>2</sup> *They informed [...] river*: My research has unearthed a report describing a suicide under very similar circumstances to these in the London *Evening Standard* of the 27<sup>th</sup> August, 1998. I can only assume that Peterkin read it, and its gruesome details captured his imagination.

<sup>3</sup> *His Master's Steps*: I have been working part-time at the local municipal library lately, cataloguing some of their recent acquisitions. It is tedious work, but the income supplements my grant money. Yesterday I had a horrible shock; while looking over a sheet listing the titles packed in a couple of crates received from another library that had closed down, the following item caught my eye: *His Master's Steps*, by Rachel Symmes. I opened the boxes and frantically scoured their contents, but did not find the book. Searches on the databases I have been using to collate information returned no matches for either the title or the author's name. I do not know what to make of this, but it has chilled me to the marrow.

<sup>4</sup> *certain thinkers of the ancient world*: The doctrine of eternal recurrence schematically described here is roughly that of the Stoics (see Introduction, ‘A Discussion of the Text’).

<sup>5</sup> *for those [...] meaning*: cf. Borges’s ‘The Immortal’, specifically the following section.

Among the Immortals [...] every act (and every thought) is the echo of others that preceded it in the past, with no visible beginning, or the faithful presage of others that in the future will repeat it to a vertiginous degree. There is nothing that is not as if lost in a maze of indefatigable mirrors. Nothing can happen only once, nothing is preciously precarious. The elegiacal, the serious, the ceremonial, do not hold for the Immortals. (1970b, p.146)

<sup>6</sup> *Gore [...] the wall*: This is a paragon of the incursion of a thing of horror as Peterkin formulated it (see Appendix II, ‘A Treatise on Horror’); a sudden irruption of the preternatural and repugnant into a nominally mimetic framework (though, of course, *The Wanderer* is at no pains to establish a prevailing sense of realism). It is also an instance at which the fictionality of the text is made manifest. Jane does not see the bleeding wall herself, only Jeremy does, and, according to the narrative, he never speaks to her about his experience in the tunnel. How then could she describe it to the gathering in the Nightingale? Furthermore, the resonances between this moment and similar images earlier in this inset tale and in William’s account of his girlfriend’s death suggest a symbolic assemblage not consistent with a memoir.

<sup>7</sup> *First she [...] simpletons*: Jane’s dream prefigures a scene that will occur later in the frame narrative. This moment functions as another explicitly fictive index in a rhizome of such signs that counters the narrator’s constant claims of veracity. The function of this ironic interplay may be aligned with the novel’s criticism of the mendacity of institutions who present their versions of the real as the truth of things and its indictment of the credulous apathy of those who do not question such ideologies.

<sup>8</sup> *a shrunk* [...] *ferrule*: From this point, until Jane's arrival at the Dark Tower, the sequence of events loosely replicates the narrative of 'Childe Roland'. This sinister old man is the double of Browning's 'hoary cripple,' (1995, p.139). Further correspondences will not be delineated in these notes.

<sup>9</sup> *I'm looking* [...] *mother*: Is this bizarre character also a faint echo of the eponymous protagonist of Beckett's *Molloy* (1950)?

<sup>10</sup> *A little* [...] *turret*: Here the analogies with 'Childe Roland' end. The foregoing ponderous and crude extended allusion is an anomaly in Peterkin's writing. One way of accounting for it is to include it with the extravagantly fictional strand of *The Wanderer*, those elements which stand in wry juxtaposition with the narrator's repeated, vehement professions of his fidelity to real events.

<sup>11</sup> Another possible reading of the intertextual play with 'Childe Roland' lies in the fact Roderick is introduced as a lecturer in English Literature, a Victorian poetry specialist. The horrors into which Jane is thrown could be seen as avatars of Roderick's deranged mind; they are therefore shaped by dark matter he knew well.

<sup>12</sup> *all uncanny* [...] *pail*: On my first read through of *The Wanderer*, I perhaps glanced only cursorily at this parenthesis; in any case I do not remember being struck by it. Returning to contemplate it now, I see its diabolical import – it counters my thesis that *The Wanderer*'s numerous allusions to other literary works are evidence of its fictionality. If aesthetic depictions of the uncanny and true horrors all flow from the same spring of dark images...

I've not been leaving the flat much recently. Some of those closest to me have expressed concerns that I'm becoming obsessed with this document. But it's important work, I'm sure of that.

<sup>13</sup> *Sinews* [...] *wrist*: This sentence provides a representative example of Peterkin's use of tonal effects in his prose. The alliteration is incantatory, invokes for the reader the harsh noise of the grisly happening described. But his deployment of poetic devices is frequently crude,

inapt, as it is here. Anything the passage gains in impact is nullified by that which is lost; impetus, at a narrative crux, is slowed to a crawl.

<sup>14</sup> *Sinews [...] the boy*: cf. Freud's essay 'The "Uncanny"' (1919, original German title, 'Das "Unheimliche"'):

Dismembered limbs, a severed head, a hand cut off at the wrist [...] all these have something peculiarly uncanny about them, especially when [...] they prove capable of independent activity in addition. (1955, p.244)

## VII

<sup>1</sup> *I must [...] tell*: It is characteristic of the novel's derisive stance towards its own narrator that, following his declaration of the urgent need for him to set down his narrative without procrastination, he embarks upon a periphrastic rumination. The ironic distance Peterkin thus engenders is another instance of the novel's extravagant erosion of the work's pretended truthfulness. The digression itself specifically recalls *Tristram Shandy*, Volume II, Chapter 8 (Sterne, 1986, pp.122-123).

<sup>2</sup> *I have [...] press on*: This passage is strongly reminiscent of *Tristram Shandy*, Volume VII, Chapter 28 (Sterne, 1986, p.492).

<sup>3</sup> *the silent [...] feet*: cf. the introduction to Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1966, original French title, *Les Mots et les choses*), in which he describes his project as an endeavour to 'restor[e] to our silent and apparently immobile soil its rifts, its instability, its flaws,' and claims 'it is the same ground that is once more stirring under our feet,' (Foucault, 1980, p.xxiv).

<sup>4</sup> *Naufana, Ghadis*: cf. Burroughs's *Cities of the Red Night* (1981). Peterkin is alluding to the following sentence, 'Naufana and Ghadis are the cities of illusion where nothing is true and



*therefore* everything is permitted,’ (p.145). Burroughs’s reference is to the supposed last words of the Islamic mystic Hassan-i Sabbah (c.1034-1124), ‘Nothing is true. Everything is permitted.’

<sup>5</sup> *a ray [...] pinions*: An ‘arch’ reference to a certain fast-food corporation?

### A Treatise on Dust

<sup>1</sup> *the Great Eastern [...] Sauchiehall Street [...] George Square*: These are all real places in Glasgow, as are many of the other locations in this tale. This is another example of Peterkin wilfully blurring fact and fiction.

<sup>2</sup> *Cartesian devil*: This device, named for René Descartes, is, in its most simple form, a hollow tube with a narrow opening at one end. When placed in a container of liquid it traps air inside, floats, neutrally buoyant. When the pressure inside the receptacle is raised, generally either by squeezing it, or screwing its lid tighter, the bubble is compressed, reducing the diver’s overall displacement, causing it to sink; when it is allowed to return to normal, the diver rises again. They are often made as toys in the forms of submarines and the like.

A reference may be intended here to the bottle-imps of Raymond Roussel’s *Locus Solus* (1914). Peterkin was fond of Roussel’s two novels *Locus Solus* and *Impressions of Africa* (1910), both of which he had read in English translations. In ‘The Infinite Library’ Peterkin writes, ‘Roussel’s lunatic system resulted not only in fictions of prodigious inventiveness, but also in the creation of a literary method that is a great source of inspiration to me’ (2000, p.87). The ‘lunatic system’ to which Peterkin refers is Roussel’s technique, described in the posthumous essay, ‘How I Wrote Certain of My Books’ (1935), of producing narratives from the manipulation of homonyms. Peterkin had experimented with this technique in the short fiction, ‘Pray, for the Fowl Soared’, contained in *The Black Arts*. Of course, the English language is not as rich in punning potential as the French, and, in it, Roussel’s method does

not admit of specific application beyond short curiosities. The French writer's influence upon Peterkin may best be understood as more general, reflected in the latter's compositional habit of formulating an abstract framework of conceits which he subsequently fleshes out with narrative. That such an underlying structure can be detected in *The Wanderer* is surely proof of its fictionality.

<sup>3</sup> *He decided [...] 1793*: The details of Marat's life and death given here roughly accord with historical fact.

<sup>4</sup> *Paracelsus*: Philippus Theophrastus Aureolus Bombastus von Hohenheim (1497-1541), Swiss physician, alchemist, astrologer, and hermeticist. Took the title Paracelsus, meaning equal to or greater than Celsus, with reference to the first century Roman encyclopaedist of that name. He had an avowed antipathy to magic and superstition. Paracelsus is the subject of an eponymous, lengthy dramatic poem, an early work by Robert Browning (see note 1 to 'One Moment Knelled the Woe of Years'). Legendarily Paracelsus did create a homunculus, and may have been the first person to use this term. However, the prescription given here differs from his; the idea of creating homunculi from the roots of the mandrake probably postdates him.

<sup>5</sup> This list of participants in Duncan's séance is typical of the narrative's discomfiting mingling of truth and invention, being a mixture of real personages and figments. There is, of course, nothing in the biographies of the historical individuals that would corroborate the narrative of 'A Treatise on Dust'.

*Joseph Lister*: (1827-1912) An English surgeon who became renowned for his promotion of the idea of sterile operating conditions after publishing a series of articles on the subject in the medical journal, *The Lancet*, in 1867. At the time, he was a professor of surgery at the University of Glasgow.

*Jacob Bridges*: Though an invention of Peterkin's, this character has clear precursors in foundlings such as Victor of Aveyron and Kaspar Hauser.

*Alexander 'Greek' Thomson:* (1817-1875) Prominent Glaswegian architect and architectural theorist, an opponent of the Gothic revival.

*Allan Pinkerton:* (1819-1884) Famous U.S. detective and spy who was born in Glasgow.

<sup>6</sup> *In the future [...] dream:* An anachronistic diatribe, another wry token of the narrative's fabulosity.

<sup>7</sup> *The Necropolis [...] rottenness:* cf. David Pike's discussion of necropoleis in *Subterranean Cities*: 'the necropolis wedded those imaginings [of the complexities of the modern world perfectly ordered, controlled, and sealed off beneath the ground] uneasily with traces of mythic reconciliation with disorder,' (Pike, 2005, p.103).

<sup>8</sup> *knew [...] many:* Indeed the tales told later of the lives of some of the notables buried in the Necropolis roughly accord with fact. The physical description of the place is also largely accurate. Peterkin had previously written a very different kind of horror tale whose events centred on the Glasgow cemetery in his novel *The Necropolis* (1993), and this intertextual reference could be seen as another of *The Wanderer's* moments of self-conscious fictionality.

<sup>9</sup> *John Knox:* A statue of the Scottish clergyman and leader of the Protestant Reformation (c.1510-1572) is mounted on a column rising from the summit of the hill on which the Necropolis is situated.

<sup>10</sup> *The panel [...] of her:* This is an embellished retelling of the last of the four miracles attributed to St Mungo, which are immortalised in the Glaswegian coat of arms.

<sup>11</sup> *Yes, they [...] graveyard:* There are not, in fact, any tunnels beneath the Necropolis.

<sup>12</sup> *First [...] venture:* Throughout history hermeticists and cranks have argued either that the earth is hollow, or that it is honeycombed with tunnels and caverns, and that strange beings dwell in the interior. Some of these theories would appear to be derived from accounts of the mystical kingdom of Shambhala given in certain texts of Tibetan Buddhism, though the ultimate source of most is doubtless mythological and theological depictions of underworlds.

Both ‘MS. Found in a Bottle’ and *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* by Edgar Allan Poe (see Chapter II, note 4 and Chapter V, note 1) make oblique reference to the notion of a hollow earth. The conclusions of both of these narratives depict a vessel carrying the protagonist – a vast decaying ship crewed by hoary ancients in the former’s case, a flimsy canoe in the latter’s – being borne by seething currents towards a chasm at the South Pole, doubtless intended to signify an entrance to the interior of the globe (indeed, in a note appended to ‘MS. Found in a Bottle’, Poe describes how, after writing the tale, he discovered the maps of Mercator, ‘in which the ocean is represented as rushing, by four mouths, into the (northern) Polar Gulf, to be absorbed into the bowels of the earth,’ tracing a parallel between these cartographic representations and his story (1978f, p.146)). Poe was probably influenced in his conceptions by the speculations of Jeremiah N. Reynolds (see note 11 to Introduction, ‘A Discussion of the Text’).

<sup>13</sup> *gave [...] into them*: This image seems to have been inspired by a childhood incident. When Peterkin was nine he fell into an irrigation ditch and landed on top of a badly decomposed dead sheep.

<sup>14</sup> *Duncan called [...] eyes*: cf. the episode in Jules Verne’s *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (1864) when Axel becomes separated from Professor Lidenbrock and Hans, and his lamp breaks. Indeed, as David Pike notes in *Subterranean Cities*, the ‘crisis of separation from the group, and the loss of [the] source of light and experience of absolute darkness,’ was a key narrative component of the nineteenth-century literature of the underground adventure (2005, p.118). It remains a plot element common in modern horror literature.

## IX

<sup>1</sup> *Then [...] gagged*: Another moment perhaps suggested by the rotten sheep’s carcass Peterkin fell upon as a child.

<sup>2</sup> *From time [...] imprecations*: cf. similarly described, enigmatic and ancient machinery in M. John Harrison's *A Storm of Wings* (1980), (2000b, pp.183-362).

## X

<sup>1</sup> 'Well, ' he began [...] since: A few days ago, something happened to cast doubt on my conviction that *The Wanderer* is a work of fiction. While I was browsing in a second-hand bookshop in Stoke Newington, a volume at the bottom of a pile of stock waiting to be shelved caught my attention. The title inscribed on its spine, in gold, was *Tales from the Land of Nod*, and I was drawn to it for I recalled that the Land of Nod is the place to the east of Eden where Cain is banished by God after murdering his brother Abel in 'The Book of Genesis', and Cain's story was much in my thoughts for reasons that will become clear to the reader who pores over the remainder of 'Chapter X' of *The Wanderer* (an uncanny correspondence that I have subsequently discovered is that 'nod' is the root of the Hebrew verb 'to wander' and that one interpretation of the Biblical passage that has been advanced is that Cain was cursed to roam the earth forever). The name of the author, Walter Waldegrave, was not known to me. I knelt down to take a closer look, and upset the stack. The bookseller bustled over to set things aright, waving aside my clumsy attempts to help. As I was the only customer in the premises, I was spared any great embarrassment, but, in order to mollify the proprietor, I thought I ought to buy the book. In any case, I was curious. [As I mentioned in my introduction, the volume described here was not found among Anderson's things after his disappearance, though a photocopy of a tale apparently from it was included along with *The Wanderer* manuscript in the package his mother sent me of material from his office. No reference has been found to *Tales from the Land of Nod* in the catalogues of the British Library or the Library of Congress in Washington, and no record has been found of a writer named Walter

Waldegrave. Perhaps Anderson invented the book, fabricating the facsimile, though it is not clear what end this would have served – *Editor*]

I went straight to a nearby coffee shop, ordered an espresso, took the book from the brown paper bag in which the shopkeeper had placed it. It is a slim hardback, bound in dull red leather, unadorned apart from the embossed gilt lettering on its spine. I opened it. Its first few leaves are blank. They are followed by a frontispiece, an etching depicting an old man with a matted beard, dressed in a heavy cloak, and stood, hunched, leaning on a knotty staff amid a barren, rocky landscape. Facing it is the title page; the text printed there runs as follows:

Tales from the Land of Nod  
Ten startling stories heard from the lips of men of the Legion Lost  
By Walter Waldegrave.

There is no other information, no publisher's or printer's details, no publication date. Turning the leaf, I found an epigraph:

Him the Almighty Power  
Hurl'd headlong flaming from th'Ethereal Skie  
With hideous ruine and combustion down  
To bottomless perdition.

This quotation is taken from lines 44-47 of Book I of *Paradise Lost* (Milton, 1667).

Though greatly intrigued, I forced myself to postpone perusing the book until I was the quieter surroundings of my office – the bustle of the café was distracting.

The following morning, at home, I read the entirety of *Tales from the Land of Nod*. It is a very strange literary artefact. It contains ten episodes, which are presented as factual accounts. They relate encounters on the trail in some of the least hospitable places of the world, set

across a period spanning the last few years of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth. They lack any overarching narrative; the only thing unifying the collection is the identity of the narrator. The format of the first nine episodes is familiar from supernatural and horror literature – a tale is inset into a frame describing the narrator’s meeting with its teller. I leafed through them eagerly, with enjoyment, revelling in their archaic, awkward style.

But I did not enjoy reading the tenth episode, which has the rambling title, ‘A Tale of Penury, Bloody Murder, Card-Sharpping Swindles, Sham Séances, and the Realms of the Foul Olden Horrors that Prowl the Primeval Lightless Ways that Riddle the Earth: The Chilkoot Trail, 1897’. In fact it gave rise to a creeping dread in me. It is an account of the first time a bizarre yarn was related to the narrator by someone he met on the road. It was this experience, so he writes, that gave him his craving for similar odd tales. In ‘A Tale of Penury’, though, the strange yarn itself is left out; the narrator claims he promised never to divulge it to another soul. The reason it filled me with an uncanny fear is that the correspondences between it and both ‘A Treatise on Dust’ and Duncan’s tale of his life are eerie [as I noted in my introduction, the story is included in this volume, it forms Appendix I – *Editor*].

I read the last few pages of ‘A Tale of Penury’ with my heart pounding in my chest. On finishing it, I shut *Tales from the Land of Nod* gently, warily, as if the book might revenge itself upon me for rough handling. Then I telephoned a friend and arranged to take a walk with him that afternoon; I needed company if I was to stave off madness.

We met in Greenwich. A balmy sun hung in a cloudless sky, and the streets were thronged with people, many of whom were eating ice-creams; the scene resembled a picture postcard bought in a British seaside resort. We crossed to the Isle of Dogs by way of the Greenwich Foot Tunnel. I was seized by terror on reaching the foot of the circular staircase and stepping out into the harsh grainy striplighting of the subway, and was glad when we were out in the open once more, on the other side of the river.

Heading north, we walked by a cricket match in Mudchute Park; passed along the wharfs of Millwall Docks, where floated a scum of dead leaves, crisp packets, and beer cans; crossed Canada Square; then bore west, towards St Anne's, Limehouse.

On reaching the church, we entered the graveyard, spent some minutes gazing up at its fanciful, baroque spire. Like Christ Church Spitalfields, St Anne's was designed by Hawksmoor, and the close resemblance between the two buildings recalled 'That's the Way to Do It!'. I fought to suppress a tremor.

My friend and I wandered down to Limehouse Basin. It was a blustery day, but the wind was baffled by the apartment blocks surrounding the dock, and the surface of the water was unruffled. A drake pursued a duck, hither and thither, not quite agile enough to catch her.

By then we were growing weary; the heat had waxed oppressive, thunderheads had gathered in the sky. We tramped into the City by way of Cable Street. There were not many people out and about at that time of day, in that part of town; there were moments when, as far as we could see in both directions, the road was deserted – in those brief periods it felt as if we were the lone survivors of a terrible catastrophe. Gusts blew crumpled smeary brown paper bags across the tarmac, from gutter to gutter. We skirted a group of children crouched down behind an overturned shopping trolley, lobbing fistfuls of gravel at passers by – farcical revenants of those brave bearded Jews and Irish Catholic dockers who manned the barricades in 1936 and thwarted Mosley's Blackshirts. Nearing the City, we came to a stretch where the Docklands Light Railway ran alongside the street on a raised viaduct, brambles, bracken, and nettles flourishing in its dank shade. Peering into this undergrowth, I made out the rusting skeletons of several abandoned cars.

On reaching The Tower, we turned and headed north, fetching up in Islington just as the first heavy drops of rain began to fall. We ducked into a pub called the Island Queen to shelter from the storm, and ended up drinking in there until closing. By the time I got home, tired and a little soused, I had all but forgotten the tale that had so disquieted me that morning. But,



entering my flat, the first thing my eyes fell upon was *Tales from the Land of Nod*, the title on its spine glittering spitefully.

I have now had several days to think about the uncanny coincidences between ‘A Tale of Penury’ and *The Wanderer*. The only plausible explanation I can think of is that Peterkin had read Waldegrave’s strange work, and, perhaps entranced by it, had decided to extrapolate, from the terse suggestive account of the dread things that befell H——, a version of the entire bizarre story. This notion has, to a certain extent, put my mind at rest.

However, I cannot put from my mind the more sinister conclusions which could be drawn – that either some malicious hoax is being perpetrated against me, or *The Wanderer* manuscript is what it appears to be, a true account of events in the life of a man cursed with immortality.

<sup>2</sup> *Most [...] hearken*: cf. John Donne’s ‘A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning’ (1633):

If they be two, they are two so  
     As stiffe twin compasses are two;  
 Thy soule, the fixt foot, makes no show  
     To move, but doth, if the’ other doe.

And though it in the center sit,  
     Yet when the other far doth rome,  
 It leanes and hearkens after it,  
     And growes erect, as that comes home. (2002, p.34)

<sup>3</sup> *the strange [...] thunder*: cf. *Melmoth the Wanderer*, ‘the strange and solemn accents of the only human voice that had respired mortal air beyond the period of mortal life, and never spoken but to the ear of guilt or suffering, and never uttered to that ear aught but despair, rolled slowly on their hearing like a peal of distant thunder,’ (Maturin, 2000, p.599).

<sup>4</sup> *I knew [...] influence*: Another specific reference to Borges's 'The Immortal':

Because of his past or future virtues, every [immortal] man is worthy of all goodness, but also of all perversity, because of his infamy in the past or future [...] I know of those who have done evil so that in future centuries good would result, or would have resulted in those already past.... Seen in this manner, all our acts are just, but they are also indifferent. There are no moral or intellectual merits. (1970b, p.145)

<sup>5</sup> *The, one fateful [...] useless to me*: cf. Poe's 'A Descent into the Maelström' (Poe, 1841).

<sup>6</sup> *The rash [...] sea*: cf. the folk tale of the Flying Dutchman, a ship cursed to sail the oceans forever.

cf. also Poe's 'MS. Found in a Bottle' (see Chapter II, note 4).

<sup>7</sup> The note given here is scrawled in the margins of manuscript and linked with this passage by a line; the handwriting is Peterkin's. It is possible it represents the tentative beginnings of a metatextual strand that Peterkin planned to produce, perhaps in homage to the occasional footnoting in his beloved *Melmoth*. Other than this gloss the document is, with the exception of the strange stains on pages 204-216, and the substitution of book titles, devoid of markings.

The French novelist, unidentified here, may be intended to represent Jules Verne, to whom *The Wanderer* alludes in other places.

*Reynolds*: a reference to Poe's supposed last words, cf. Introduction, 'A Discussion of the Text', Chapter V, note 1, and Peterkin's short story 'Reynolds'.

<sup>8</sup> *returned [...] minds*: cf. Deleuze's comment in the essay 'Literature and Life' (1993) that, '[t]he [minor] writer returns from what he has seen and heard with bloodshot eyes and pierced eardrums,' (1997, p.3).

## XI

<sup>1</sup> *That's the way to do it!*: Last night, I met a group of friends for a few drinks at a pub about twenty minutes walk from my flat. We stayed long after last orders had been called; the barstaff began wiping tables and stacking chairs about us. Finally we became aware of their impatience and, slightly sheepish, left. Outside we said our farewells and went our separate ways. It was blustery, leaves and crisp packets scudded along the street. When I was about halfway home the wind dropped and a light drizzle began falling. Then, as I passed by a darkened alleyway, I heard a dreadful yawp – Punch's refrain of 'That's the way to do it!'

I ran home, terrified. This morning I feel almost sure it was nothing but a drunken delusion. Still, I cannot shake the echo of that baleful cry; it resounds in my head...

<sup>2</sup> *a row [...] on spikes*: cf. the heads on poles before Kurtz's house in *Heart of Darkness* (Conrad, 1995a, p.120). Elliot's palisade also recalls the compound in H.G. Wells's *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896), especially in the manner the natives view it with commingled reverence and loathing.

<sup>3</sup> *King Stork*: The allusion here is to Aesop's fable 'King Log and King Stork'. In the tale, King Stork is a tyrannical ruler who eats his frog subjects.

<sup>4</sup> *sitting astride a tiger*: cf. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (c.8<sup>th</sup> Century), the section entitled 'Examination of the Signs of Death which Occur in Dreams':

If one dreams of riding a tiger, fox, or corpse,  
Or of riding a buffalo, pig, camel, or donkey,  
While moving further and further towards the south,  
This is a sign of death. (Padmasambhava, 2006, pp.160-161)

<sup>5</sup> *Looking [...] mist*: cf. the conclusion of Poe's *Arthur Gordon Pym* (1999, pp.245-246).

<sup>6</sup> *pages [...] smears*: A number of red stains mark this section of the manuscript (pp.204-216). Presumably these were made by Peterkin – another device designed to give the novel the air of found manuscript.

## XI

<sup>1</sup> *slimy things*: cf. ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ (1798) by Samuel Taylor Coleridge:

The many men, so beautiful!  
And they all dead did lie:  
And a thousand thousand slimy things  
Lived on; and so did I. (1965, p.113)

<sup>2</sup> *Besides [...] ahead*: cf. Roland Barthes’s *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973, original French title, *Le plaisir du texte*), section entitled ‘Edges’ (pp.6-13), in particular:

[W]hat I enjoy in a narrative is not directly its content or even its structure, but rather the abrasions I impose upon the fine surface: I read on, I skip, I look up, I dip in again. Which has nothing to do with the deep laceration the text of bliss inflicts upon language itself, and not upon the simple temporality of its reading. (1990, p.12)

<sup>3</sup> *I felt [...] softened*: cf. *The Thousand and One Nights* (*The Penguin Tales from the Thousand and One Nights*, Anon., 1973).

## XIII

<sup>1</sup> *They held [...] being*: The ideas expressed here are loosely those articulated in the passages of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* concerning the transcendence of the impure cycle of existence.

<sup>2</sup> *loosely crumpling the pages*: All of the pages of *The Wanderer* manuscript up to and including Chapter XII, are indeed creased, as if at some point they have been balled up, then smoothed out again. Unlike the stains on pages 204-216, this artifice is not one it would have been possible to reproduce in a published edition, something Peterkin could not have failed to have been aware of. I have no idea why he went to such lengths to give his manuscript an air of authenticity. He may have become obsessive, though he seemed sane on the occasions when I saw him during the weeks leading up to his disappearance.

Perhaps the manuscript was created by him to torment me. This would account for his leaving his unpublished writings to me, and for the uncanny coincidences I have noted between occurrences described in the novel and real happenings – Peterkin, still alive, could be engineering those events.

But there was never any animosity between us during the time I worked for him, indeed I would go so far as to say we became friends, and I cannot think of any reason why he would wish for me to suffer. In any case, however, I do not believe him capable of such sadism, and certainly not of committing those murders which find analogues in *The Wanderer*, despite the relish with which he sometimes depicted cruelty in his fiction. Unless... Had he some reason for seeking vengeance against me so powerful it had deranged him utterly?

The other possible explanation, that *The Wanderer* is a genuine memoir, is too absurd to contemplate.

<sup>3</sup> *Your attempt [...] writing*: cf. Kafka's 'In the Penal Colony' (1914, original German title, 'In der Strafkolonie').

<sup>4</sup> *drove the spike*: Given the narrator's (and, of course, Peterkin's) enthusiasm for blues music, an allusion to Mississippi John Hurt's 'Spike Driver Blues' might be intended here. This variant of the John Henry myth is a tale of defiance – a railroad worker who does not wish to share the fate of his legendary fellow sets down the main tool of his trade with the words, 'Take this hammer and carry it to my captain, tell him I'm gone.'

<sup>5</sup> *rusty old saw*: This 'old saw' could allude to 'old saws' in the sense of a proverb, perhaps specifically to the adage, 'Seeing is believing,' which became the axiom of the empirical age (see Introduction, 'A Discussion of the Text').

<sup>6</sup> *sundered parts*: cf. the myth of Tereus, Procne, and Philomela (see Chapter II, note 3). This sawing in sunder of Elliot's body can be viewed as an allusion to sparagmos, the ancient ritual of sacrifice by rending apart that the Maenads, the female followers of Dionysus, apparently partook in (see Introduction, 'A Discussion of the Text').

<sup>7</sup> *The Ouroboros Apparatus*: Ouroboros is one name for the ancient archetype of a serpent devouring its own tail. It is a trope often used to symbolise ideas of cyclicity (see also Introduction, 'A Discussion of the Text'). Michel Carrouges's bachelor machine concept is relevant here. In his essay 'Directions for Use' (1954), Carrouges identifies a number of imaginary devices in literary texts and the visual arts which he describes as 'first and foremost *mental machines*, the imaginary working of which suffices to produce a real movement of the mind,' (1975, p.44). These apparatuses consist of two zones that are bound into a closed system – any action of one zone will produce a corresponding reaction in the other. They represent a sexual figuration, composed of one male and one female element, and only eroticism can set them in motion. Key examples for Carrouges are the apparatus of Kafka's 'In the Penal Colony', and Marcel Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (1923, original French title, *La mariée mis à nu par ses célibataires, même*) (the trope derives its name from this latter work). The Ouroboros figure could be seen as a bachelor

machine in the clear sexual configuration of its two zones – the head and the tail – and in the reciprocity of action that exists between them.

In his essay ‘The Arts of Dying: Celibatory Machines’ (1975, original French title, *Arts de mourir: écritures anti-mystiques*), Michel de Certeau extends the notion to include discourse, arguing the functioning of dreams, as described in Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams*, is that of the celibatory machine:

It is an “apparatus” [...] that is built around an internal difference and is composed of interconnected “systems” [...] functioning in such a way that *it is inscribed* and accumulates within (mnemic traces), in such a way that it circulates – forward during the day, and backwards at night [...] – and in such a way that it transforms energy.  
(1986a, p.157)

In other words it operates as a closed circuit, with two different zones, or systems, one inscribing the other (the events of the day ‘writing’ the dreams of the night), and transforms energies (the quotidian into the oneiric). *The Wanderer* might be seen as belonging to the series. Its assemblage consists of two key components that are disposed according to an erotic schema: its protestations of veraciousness, and its self-evident fictionality. But what is the means by which this seemingly ‘stalled machine produces,’ (Certeau, 1986, p.165)? De Certeau’s claim is that ‘[i]ts engine is [the] “other,” [...] therefore, first and foremost, the reader,’ (1986, p.167). And so it is with *The Wanderer*: it derives its uncanny power from the reader’s fear that it might be what it claims to be, a true account.

But it is not just the text itself that gives rise to dread in me. Peterkin’s marginal note, and the other features that make *The Wanderer* seem a real artefact – the crumpled pages, the strange stains – compound my anxiety. And there are also those coincidences I have noted between incidents described in the novel and events that have actually occurred.

I am left with only two possible explanations, both equally disconcerting – either Peterkin has mounted an elaborate and deranged hoax the sole purpose of which is to harass me; or *The Wanderer* was not written by Peterkin at all, but is a genuine chronicle.

<sup>8</sup> *On entering [...] was*: The eerie animation of the gobbets of Elliot's dismembered carcass is another example of *The Wanderer's* exploitation of the uncanny in the generation of horror. See 'One Moment Knelled the Woe of Years', note 14.

#### XIV

<sup>1</sup> *We saved [...] soundlessly*: Ironical reference may be intended to Bendigeid Vran, Bran the Blessed, of Celtic mythology. *The Mabinogion* tells that, after the head of this giant was severed from his body, it continued to speak for fourscore-and-seven years, during which period it was as pleasant company as it ever had been when on his shoulders. The time came to be known as 'the entertaining of the noble head'. Eventually, Vran's head was buried under the Gwynvryn, the 'White Mount', in London (a place probably intended to signify the Tower), facing France as a ward against invasion.

#### XI

<sup>1</sup> *Joseph Curwen*: The name of a sinister occultist in H.P. Lovecraft's *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* (1927).

<sup>2</sup> Last night I sat down after supper to watch the news on television. The lead report profoundly unsettled me; I was only able to sleep after a bout of drinking – I have a sore head and squirming guts this morning. The lair of a serial killer has been discovered in the Trossachs. The item yesterday evening was vague, and the newspaper articles this morning



contain little more information, yet what has been released to the press is strangely resonant with Claire's tale.

I am writing this several days after the above paragraph. The media is still much preoccupied with the horrific killings in Scotland. I have been trying to avoid finding out any more about the story – for I cannot bear to have further confirmation of my fears – but this morning I accidentally glimpsed the following words written in marker pen howling from the board of a tabloid vendor: 'Trossachs Butcher Minced Up Bodies to Use as Fertilizer'. I fear I may go mad.

<sup>3</sup> *responded [...] classified:* My mother, concerned about my well-being, and what she perceives as my unhealthy obsession with Peterkin's manuscript, insisted I stay with her for a short while, get away from London and my work. She has been ill recently, so to mollify her I agreed. Accordingly, a week ago, I packed a suitcase with a few clothes, a washkit, and some books, went down to Liverpool Street Station and boarded a train for Norwich. My mother met me at the station. On spotting me coming through the ticket barrier, she put her hand up to her mouth – I did not look good, unkempt, skin the colour of plaice left sitting too long on the fishmonger's counter – but she recovered herself and approached me smiling, reached out and tousled my hair, as if I were still a child.

'Hello,' she said.

I nodded.

'Hello.'

Then we walked the short distance back to her house, the house I grew up in, a narrow three-storey semi-detached with sash windows, built in the 1930s. No words passed between us as we walked. None were called for; my mother and I have never needed to resort to empty talk to yoke ourselves together in mutual affection, have always been close – it has always been just the two of us, for I am an only child and the offspring of a drunken tryst – from what

I gather my mother barely knew my father, and never saw him again after the fateful night, though, for obvious reasons, she is reluctant to discuss this with me.

It was, therefore, not until we stood outside the front door that either one of us spoke again. It was my mother: while she was rifling frantically through her handbag for her keys – a few fat drops of rain had begun to fall from the lowering clouds, harbingers of a heavy downpour – she said, ‘I must empty out some of this stuff.’

I felt better straight away on entering the house. My mother had made up the bed in my old childhood bedroom, now the spare room. When I came down to the kitchen, having put my things up there, I found she had made a pot of tea.

‘Tea?’ I said. ‘I don’t drink tea.’

‘Well, you should.’

She got a tin of chocolate biscuits out of a cupboard, and we sat at the table in companionable silence, hands wrapped around mugs, slurping our teas, occasionally dunking a biscuit.

My mother works, nine till five, Monday to Friday, at the University of East Anglia library, but we spent our evenings together – went to the cinema once, had a couple of meals out, that sort of thing. In the daytime I went for walks in Norwich and the surrounding countryside, read books taken down from the shelves that line the walls in my old room, childhood favourites, and spent a long time gazing down out of the window at a small patch of wasteground beyond the fence at the bottom of the garden. Towards the end of the Second World War a lone incendiary bomb, dropped by a German plane returning home after a raid over the East End of London, had struck and razed the small textile factory that had occupied the site. The land had never afterwards been built upon, had been abandoned to riotous scrub. I remember often, as a young boy, climbing the fence and wandering through the tall grasses, nettles, brambles, and stunted alders that grow there, chatting with friendly figments, striking out with brittle stalks of dead cow parsley at malevolent ones.

When I left Norwich yesterday, I felt sure *The Wanderer* was nothing more sinister than a work of fiction Peterkin had, in a strange fit, attempted to give the semblance of a found manuscript. My mother came to wave me off at the station. To while away the journey I had bought a newspaper. The train was delayed by a points failure just outside Colchester, and, having nothing else to do, I ended up reading it from cover to cover. As the locomotive slowed to pass through Stratford station, my eyes, flitting over the pages of the classified section, alighted at random upon an advertisement and were stuck as fast as a sparrow on a limed twig. I do not think I need record here the harrowing contents of that ad.

So now I have sure proof I am not delusional. Either Peterkin persecutes me, or *The Wanderer* narrative is a true account. The latter explanation is, of course, hardly credible. *The Wanderer* must be a hoax. The reference to Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Angel of the Odd' (see Chapter II, note 2), indeed suggests the manuscript was contrived by Peterkin to suggest this.

There is also another way in which the allusions to Poe's works could be read as a device placed there to intimate *The Wanderer* is faked. In 1844, Poe published an article in the *New York Sun*, an account of a balloon trip across the Atlantic Ocean, which was presented as reportage, but was, in fact, a fiction. It was not particularly plausible and it is unclear to what extent contemporary readers were fooled, though they apparently clamoured to buy copies of the edition of the newspaper containing it, at least according to Poe himself. He attempted to lend credibility to the story by including a preponderance of quasi-scientific detail and a section counterfeiting a journal account written by one of the aeronauts.

I think *The Wanderer* must be a sham written by Peterkin to torment me, drive me mad. The events that have happened which seem to resonate with occurrences detailed in the manuscript must be extraordinary coincidences, unless he somehow engineered them. He must have included those things that hint that *The Wanderer* is a hoax either to befuddle me – enmesh me still further in his toils; or perhaps, in a moment of clemency, as rents in his net

through which I could bolt if I proved astute enough. Yet, even though I spotted these things, I am still utterly entangled.

I cannot, however, think what motive he might have. Unless... He remained distraught, more than twenty years on, over the deaths of his wife and child. My father is a blank to me. Is it possible he was the lorry driver whose negligence took Peterkin's family away from him? Would Peterkin exact revenge on the son for the sins of the father? But the whole scenario is absurdly unlikely. And even if it were true, how could Peterkin have learnt who my father is, when my mother, the only person who knows, never speaks of it. And even had he somehow found out, could he have laid such a snare?

Something further has suggested itself to me. It would explain the fact the titles of three books originally referred to in the manuscript were scored out and replaced by allusions to Poe's *Arthur Gordon Pym*, Lovecraft's *At the Mountains of Madness*, and Verne's *The Sphinx of the Ice-Fields*. I have been looking again through the notebook Peterkin was using at the time of his disappearance, and discovered this observation, 'Both Verne's and Lovecraft's formulations vitiate the horror of Poe's original conception.' I remember reading it previously and thinking nothing of it; now it seems imbued with terrifying significance. I will explain why.

I have already remarked, in these footnotes, that *The Sphinx of the Ice-Fields* is a sequel to *Arthur Gordon Pym*. It is also rationalisation of that work. It posits Poe's novel as a mostly true account, but either accounts for, by scientific principles, or rejects, as hallucinations, all the horrors and wonders of the American writer's imagination (see Introduction, 'A Discussion of the Text' for further analysis of this).

*At the Mountains of Madness* is also, in some ways, a sequel to *Arthur Gordon Pym*: it contains references to Poe's novel, and takes from it the haunting cry of the gigantic white birds of the polar regions seen by Pym, 'Tekeli-li!', which becomes, in Lovecraft's novel, the call of the eldritch, olden entities discovered by the narrator in the Antarctic wastes.

Lovecraft's approach to the material differs significantly from Verne's, however. In *At the Mountains of Madness*, Poe's novel is asserted to be a fabrication. It is one, though, that may have had its origins in Poe's reading of 'unsuspected and forbidden sources', notably, it is hinted, that dark book of Lovecraft's fabulation, the *Necronomicon* of the mad Arab Abdul Alhazred (1964a, p.91). Lovecraft subsumes the tale into his idiosyncratic, fictional mythos, circumscribes it. This is perhaps because, for Lovecraft, Poe's playful suggestion that *Arthur Gordon Pym* is a testimony, not an invention, would have been too disturbing, would have suggested the existence of real prodigies, ones that escape the controlled bounds of fiction. Moreover, the chaos of Poe's fragmentary, incomplete, and amorphous text would have been insupportable; Lovecraft's real fear, as many commentators have noted, was of disorder: in his writings the approach of the monstrous and vile is often heralded by the Dionysian piping of flutes.

By inserting references to *Arthur Gordon Pym*, *The Sphinx of the Ice-Fields*, and *At the Mountains of Madness* into *The Wanderer* manuscript, Peterkin was perhaps indicating to any reader perceptive and thorough enough that, just as Verne's scientific approach and Lovecraft's mythologising forced unsatisfactory resolutions upon Poe's enigma, so rationalising, or fabulous readings of *The Wanderer* constitute distortions. Perhaps he sought to indicate, clandestinely, that he felt the document an authentic account of things that had really happened, or were to happen, in which case it was clearly found, not written.

I must know the truth; I have replied to the classified under an assumed name.

## Epilogue

<sup>1</sup> *I have become [...] mine*: In this passage the narrator formulates his cosmology (see introduction, 'A Discussion of the Text' for further discussion).

The more I reflect upon the theory outlined here, the more uneasy I become. It could account for the strange coincidences I have noted of late, the remarkable correspondences I have observed between events described in *The Wanderer* and things that have actually occurred. The survival of the manuscript from a previous cycle of existence, with a similar, but subtly different history, would explain all. Is *The Wanderer*, in truth, an artefact protected by sorcery that has weathered the death and rebirth of the universe, and unfathomable aeons before coming into my hands?

Unless... Perhaps Peterkin contrived everything, hoping I should fall prey to that delusion, hoping its dread implications would madden me. A strange and awful vengeance.

I doubt, however, he reckoned on me believing without question the manuscript to be genuine – he knew me well enough to realise I was not credulous enough for that. He must have apprehended it would be sufficient merely to sow the seeds of perplexity. It was in this way he sought to torment me, to assail my sanity. I need to find a way to end my bewilderment, discover the truth. I had relied on a reply to my response to the classified for this, but I have not received one.

Having scanned a few relevant sections of *The Wanderer*, I believe I have found a way to resolve the crux. The Nightingale is, as I have noted, a real pub, and I have now discovered a means by which to fix the day on which the gathering is depicted as taking place. Jane relates that her harrowing experience in the Woolwich Foot Tunnel took place one afternoon four and a half years before the meeting. She also states Thames Barrier Park had opened a year and a half before that fateful day. The park was officially inaugurated in November 2000 which roughly dates the meeting in the Nightingale to late 2006, early 2007. The narrator describes the evening of the gathering as having been a cold one in early spring, so the year must be 2007. Furthermore, he writes a total eclipse of the moon was to take place later on that night. There is only one total eclipse of the moon predicted for spring 2007; it will occur on the 3<sup>rd</sup> March.

Today is the 25<sup>th</sup> February 2007. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> March I will go to the Nightingale.

<sup>2</sup> *I am homeward [...] again*: The narrative, at its conclusion, returns to its beginning. This could be read as an intimation the narrator will remain trapped in the cycle of eternal recurrence, that his manuscript will not have the transformative effect he hopes it will (see introduction, 'A Discussion of the Text' for further discussion).

## **Appendix I**

### **A Tale of Penury, Bloody Murder, Card-Sharpping Swindles, Sham Séances, and the Realms of the Foul Olden Horrors that Prowl the Primeval Lightless Ways that Riddle the Earth**

#### **The Chilkoot Trail, 1897**

My fund of eldritch narratives (at least those I can tell without compromising my principles; it will become clear what I mean by this) is now exhausted, but I feel it important for me to relate how I first came by my mania for wandering the wild and barren places of the earth seeking men of that strange band, the Legion Lost, striking up acquaintances with them, and asking them to recount for me their bizarre tales of woe and hardship. To this effect, I present the following – the story of my hearing the yarn that, like a drug, got me craving for others of its ilk. Sadly, though, I promised the man who told it to me I would not ever breathe or write one word of it, and I will not go against my scruples on this point. Therefore this account will have a void at its heart, an absence.

It was the autumn of '97. I was young and foolish. Lured by tales of Yukon Gold, I, along with tens of thousands of other poor venturesome sapskulls, outfitted myself in Seattle and secured a berth on a ship bound for Alaska. In doing so I spent most of an inheritance I had been bequeathed by a rich uncle, a banker. I disembarked at Skagway, the Alaskan port from which one could most easily make one's way to the gold fields in the vicinity of Dawson City. Before the rush, Skagway had been an outpost of the fur trade, a dismal place of churned mud and clapboard shacks, inhabited by a mere handful of brutish men who bludgeoned seals to scrape a living, but by '97 was moiling with unscrupulous provisioners, whores, and



crackbrained missionaries, all there to waylay, gull, and fleece the frantic, reckless, and easily-duped stampeders who passed through. I, myself, tarried there a deal longer than I should have, mainly due to the ministrations of a pretty young moll named Laura. It was only when I noticed the nights were waxing longer than the days, I realized I would have to light out if I was to make it over the mountains into Canada before winter set in and the notches became impassable. I paid a visit to the Tlingit camp just outside of town and took on three Indians to lug my food and equipment, then found a ferry prepared to take us over to Dyey, a small settlement at the head of the trail.

On the morning of the second day I reached the foot of the Golden Staircase, a set of steps cut, long before, by the Tlingit, into the snow and ice, that snaked up a steep slope to the Chilkoot Pass. It was a cold and gray day, exceedingly cold and gray. At the foot of the steps was the Scales, a tent city, with a saloon and a couple of restaurants, that had sprung up around a Mountie checkpoint where packs were weighed to ensure all stampeders carried at least a ton of supplies, reckoned a year's worth – a measure put in place to prevent those bound for the gold fields from being driven to desperate acts of plunder against Canadian homesteaders. This stipulation meant that many, those too poor to afford to pay Indians to help them carry their load, had to make several trips between campsites lugging their provisions – the rigors of the route were too much for pack animals. The weight of my baggage was found to be greater than that required, and I was allowed through the checkpoint with my bearers. There was a primitive horse-drawn tramway offering to haul loads up to the highest point of the trail, but the fees being charged were exorbitant, and besides, I preferred to trust my things to my reliable Indians, than to that ridiculous contraption.

I set out, trudged on up the staircase, clinging to the guide rope with a fierce grip, eyes narrowed against the flurries of sleet blown into my face, my bearers ahead of me.

A great number of us seekers of gold, and our guides and baggage carriers, all hooded against the bitter cold, scrambled up the steps. We looked pilgrims bound for a shrine containing a precious relic – in a way, I suppose this is exactly what we were, though it was to gold that we pledged our devotions and made our supplications.

Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say we resembled an order of flagellants, for if the man in front, fatigued, slowed, many would – the way being too narrow to pass by, and they, frantic to cross the ridge before nightfall when the temperatures would plummet – drive him on by striking out with anything to hand. Lengths of hempen cord served as makeshift lashes, walking staffs and pickaxe, mattock, and shovel handles were used as goads.

Or perhaps with our clothing ragged and our belongings bundled up on our backs, we looked more like bindlestiffs or hobos.

About halfway up the staircase, at the pass's famous false summit – a ridge that appears to be the highest point of the trail until reached, when a further steep climb can be seen beyond it – there was a ledge of rock beside the path offering respite from the arduous ascent. This shelf was narrow and beetled over the void, but a large number of bone-weary stampedeers, careless of the bluff's edge, sprawled, or milled about, querulously bemoaning the hardships of the trail as if they walked it at the behest of some potentate, rather than of their own volition; the noise they made was similar to one commonly heard at dusk by the sea, that of a colony of gannets roosting. Standing in knots, talking low, the Indians looked askance at their employers, no doubt contemptuous of the bellyaching – that proud race had been climbing the trail for generations. Sitting down, I took off my hobnailed boots and thick socks, and rubbed lard into my swollen, blistered, and chilblained feet.

This done, I looked about me. A man, who, seemingly oblivious to the commotion about him, stood gazing out at the prospect of snow-topsured peaks, attracted my notice. His clothing marked him out – while we men under the spell of gold were clad alike in hooded furs and oil-slickers, and the natives were dressed in garments sewn from bearskin and

deerhide, he wore a stained and torn military greatcoat, fastened with frogs of faded golden braid, a thick woolen scarf, and a beaver hat with earflaps tied under his chin with string. His thick matted beard and the locks of hair curling from beneath his hat were speckled with gray, and his back was bowed, though the impression this conveyed of decrepitude was at odds with the suggestion of sinewy vigor there was about him. I could not reach a firm conclusion about his age, however, for his back was to me and I could not see whether his face was that of a young or elderly man. He only carried a small satchel, seemed to have no pack bearers, and I wondered how he managed to get past the Mountie checkpoint. It appeared he found something enthralling in the scene before him; perhaps he perceived evidence of the Maker's workings even in that desolate place. I, too, looked out at the view, but it gave me no solace: I felt no numinous awe, saw only a harsh unforgiving landscape – I had lost my faith on the death of my young wife just over a year before.

My musings were soon disturbed – a man a little distance away took off his footwear, as I had, and, discovering several of his toes grey and shriveled, threw a conniption fit.

The afflicted stampeder was a very small wiry man, with a face like the blade of a hatchet, honed to keenness by the harsh grind of life, a shrewd, mischievous glimmer in his eyes, lank greasy blonde hair straggling down over his ears and nape, and jutting incisors. His beard was pale against his red chapped skin. In short, he was of the type of the rat-like miscreant of innumerable popular novels. He was railing about his ill luck and cussing in gruff tones, casting about him with his gimlet blue eyes, fixing other wayfarers with his glare as if he blamed them for his suffering.

Standing at his side, looking down, dull-eyed, agape, at his ruined feet, was another man, seemingly his traveling companion. No two more dissimilar individuals could be imagined. The frost-bitten wretch's friend was tall and hulking, had hands like ham hocks. He was bald, but had a thick grizzled beard. He resembled a bear. And, or so it appeared from the way his mouth was hanging open to catch the swirling flakes of snow, was something of a dolt.

After a few minutes, the bawling of the man with the ruined feet began to roil some of the other stampedeers. There were grumbles, then a brute yelled at him, calling for him to hold his tongue and keep his head. The brute's nose was squashed flat against his face, probably a legacy of a life of brawling, and that, combined with his air of irascibility, gave him the mien of a pit dog.

'I'm not taking orders from someone who looks like the kind whose sister's also his daughter,' came the jeering response.

The pit dog looked bemused at first – it took him a while to decipher the insult. Then he snarled, drew a Bowie knife from a sheath at his belt.

'I'm going to cut you open from crotch to craw, you little weasel' he said, then darted at the rat.

But the bear stepped into his path and swatted him with one of his giant paws, sending him sprawling. Before he had even hit the ground, the men of his party pulled blades and flew at the bear to avenge the insult.

What followed was reminiscent of a scene I witnessed once in a pit in southern California where they were baiting a grizzly with lions brought over from the Dark Continent.

The fighting was brutal. Many of the other stampedeers on the ledge gathered around, yawping. The Indians backed away, and looked on the ruckus with disdain. On hearing the uproar, the man garbed in the tattered greatcoat turned away from the outlook. My conjectures as to his age were ended then – I judged by his countenance he was only a few years out of his youth, though the hoar flecking his hair, and the stoop I had thought might betoken he was elderly, together with something I had not noticed before, that he had lost his right arm at the shoulder, gave him the air of one ravaged by a hard life and old beyond his years. His sleeve was pinned across his chest and flapped in the wind.

Once the scuffle was over, the big fellow stood, panting between clenched teeth, steeped in blood running from many shallow wounds to his arms and chest. His adversaries had fared

much worse, however – lay strewn about nursing cracked ribs and broken heads. The rat sat looking smugly on, his frostbite, for the moment, forgotten.

That would have been the end, had not the pit dog, recovered from the blow that had knocked him down, sneaked up behind the bear, apparently meaning to hamstring him. At that the one-armed man took a revolver from his greatcoat, leveled it at the pit dog, and shouted, ‘Enough!’

His stentorian roar brought silence to the ledge.

‘That’s enough,’ he went on, in softer, though no less authoritative tones. ‘Leave him be.’

The pit dog and his injured comrades deliquesced into the throng.

After putting his gun away, the one-armed man crossed over, knelt down beside the rat, and looking askance at him, began speaking to him in a low voice. Furtive, ashamed to be eavesdropping, but too curious to repress the urge, I drew closer, hoping to catch some of what was said. I overheard their introductions, learned the one-armed man was called Alasdair, and the rat, Peter. Much of their subsequent conversation was lost to the wind’s howl and the tumult of the other stampeders’ complaining and talk, but I managed to make out that Alasdair was attempting to get Peter to abandon his hopes of making a fortune in the Yukon, and return to the Mountie camp where he could get his feet tended to. At first the hapless fool was reluctant, but on being told he was otherwise certain to lose his toes and struggle thenceforth to walk, he seemed, suddenly, to see the good sense in the course being advised him.

Alasdair then turned to the bear, sought to persuade him to help his companion back down the mountain. This loyal friend, after only a moment’s bovine pondering agreed. His name, it transpired, was Paul; Alasdair smiled on hearing that. After putting his boots back on for him, Paul helped Peter to his feet. The two men then shambled off, Paul all but carrying Peter bodily under his arm.

I had been moved and surprised by Alasdair's bravery and kindness, such compassion being a rarity in those bitter climes, and went over to strike up a conversation. I expressed my admiration for the way he had acted. His stammered reply demonstrated great humility, but also self-righteousness.

'I think most people would have been moved to help. That no one here was is merely evidence of the way gold preys on their minds. I, though, do not hunger after earthly riches.'

I noticed a faint trace of Scots lingered in the man's accent, but he had clearly been in America some years, for it was almost buried.

We were having to shout to make ourselves heard above the clamor, and Alasdair suggested we take shelter from the noise behind a large rock at the far end of the ledge. I turned to ask my Indians to wait for me, then followed Alasdair behind the boulder.

Once we were ensconced in its lee, I asked him what, if he was not a fortune seeker, he was doing out there in that hostile waste.

He replied, 'I am a preacher and it's my calling to succor those in bleak circumstances. Where better to do so? I came out here to help, where I can. And, what's more, I succumbed once to the enticements of fabled wealth, and it eases me some to comfort those who've likewise fallen prey.'

My admiration and respect for Alasdair was fast souring, curdled by the rennet of his priggish manner; that he was a priest only irked me further.

'That gold isn't fabled,' I said, belligerently. 'I've seen some of it with my own two eyes, back in California.'

'Was just a figure of speech is all. There is gold in some of the Klondike's creeks, as you say. Most of the claims are taken, though, and even if you were able to gang together with some others and stake yourself a place, you'd most likely be driven off by roughneck claim-jumpers before you'd even had a chance to thaw out a patch of earth to dig.'

'I can look out for myself.'

‘Well, it’s not just toughs you’ve got to look out for, there are outlandish-cruel men out there who get up to things as would freeze your blood quicker than a night out in the open at the pole.’

He struck a pose, with his arm held out before him, began declaiming:

‘There are strange things done, in the midnight sun, by the men who moil for gold. The Arctic trails have their secret tales, that would make your blood run cold.’\*

Of course these verses are now familiar to me as the first lines of ‘The Cremation of Sam McGee’ by Robert W. Service, but back then they were novel, and that great poet of Yukon life, the ‘Canadian Kipling’, was yet to publish them. The only explanation I can think of is that Alasdair must have encountered and discoursed with Service during his wanderings. Service hailed from Glasgow, as, I was later to discover, did Alasdair, and it is possible, had the two men met in the frozen Yukon, so far from the city on the banks of the Clyde, they might have struck up an acquaintance over reminiscences of that place.

‘Also,’ Alasdair continued, ‘digging isn’t as easy as you’d think. It’s back-breaking labor. And even when you’ve got down to the gravel layer, chances are you’ll find it isn’t pay dirt and’ll have to try delving elsewhere.’

‘Oh, I think I’m doughty enough,’ I said, sardonically. ‘And, besides, I’ve outlaid far too much on provisions and my passage from Seattle to Skagway not to go on.’

‘You’d be better off reckoning that sum lost through ill fate and turning back now. You may have wasted money, but, as yet, you’ve risked and endured little. All the dangers and hardships lie ahead of you.’

He went on to evoke these for me, in a harangue filled with the lurid parlance of the evangelic pulpit. His description of the White Horse Rapids struck me particularly, it was so turgid, and I can recall it practically verbatim:

\* (Service, 1907, p.35) [This note was written in the margins of the photocopy, presumably by Anderson – *Editor*]

‘At one point the river runs through a narrow gully, the Miles Canyon, then courses down a steeply shelving rock-strewn reach, known as the White Horse Rapids. This is not far down the Yukon from the winter camps, you know. Yes, it is a right poetical name, isn’t it? It’s said they were christened by early pioneers who were reminded of the wind-tousled manes of hoary steeds by all the spume. Dangerous? Yes, perhaps the most treacherous stretch of the whole river, and it is at no point along its course a calm waterway. A large number of craft have been capsized or wrecked shooting the rapids, and this has resulted in the loss of provisions, and occasionally of life, for some of the men of the crews of the foundered vessels have been dragged under by eddies, and smothered by roily waters. Yes, many stampederers still tempt providence in spite of this, for many of them are foolish and rash. What’s even more astounding is that there are alternative routes, land trails that are well-known, and fairly easy-going. Impatience? Brute avarice I would call it. Fittingly the roar of the rapids sounds as the tumult of the damned in Hell must, for those that have drowned there will, for their greed, have been cast down forthwith into the infernal lake of fire.’

Once he had concluded his catalogue of risks and adversities, Alasdair looked up at a skein of geese who were flying by far overhead. He continued staring into the sky long after their silhouettes had been lost against a high dark mass of cloud moving across the welkin from the east. I said nothing, a little rattled, for I realized that, if the tone of Alasdair’s disquisition had been risible, in tenor it was probably an accurate reflection of the dangers of the route. Then, after a time, his eyes still fixed on the heavens, he sighed.

‘And you would put yourself through all of this,’ he said, ‘for material gain, which God frowns upon.’

That irked me. I resented his Pharisaical stance on the, in my view, natural hankering after wealth.

‘Thanks,’ I blustered, ‘but I’ll take my chances, and go on. I’m not gutless.’



‘I’m not impugning your pluck. Just warning you, is all. Doubtless you’ll make it to Dawson City without coming to harm. But, like I say, when you get there you’ll find local miners have taken all the gold-bearing creeks.’

Most of those who reached Dawson ended up living on the settlement’s fringes in shanties built using broken-up river craft, disappointed, milling about town, biding their time while deciding how best to make the journey back south, Alasdair said. Furthermore, he claimed that, due to the huge incursion, disease was rife and the city now teetered on the brink of famine.

‘Therefore, you may find you’re able to do some good, if you’re inclined to, and you insist on pressing on’ he continued. ‘That’s why I’m bound there. If so, you’ll have the satisfaction of knowing you’re lending a hand to a community in dire need, or rather two hands, which is more useful, when all is said and done, than just the one.’

He grinned, almost diffidently, plucked at his empty sleeve.

I was disarmed by Alasdair’s joke at his own expense and began to wonder whether I had allowed my prejudice against clerics to fog my judgment. After all, for all his cant, Alasdair had only been trying to alert me to the trials I would face. The thawing of my opinion was attended by a sudden onset of cold. Sleet began to fall from the black rack overhead, which now shrouded the entire sky. I looked round the corner of the rock behind which Alasdair and I had been conversing, and was perturbed to see one of my Indians sitting on the floor, clutching his head and shivering. I crossed over to find out what was wrong. It emerged he had taken very ill suddenly. Concerned for him, the other Indians implored me to let him return to Skagway straight away. I could hardly refuse their earnest pleas, and besides it did not look like the sick man had the strength to take up his pack again. I was resigned, therefore, to abandoning some of my provisions, and was just about to sort out a pile of the least essential items to leave behind, when Alasdair approached, asked what was the matter. When

I explained, he said, ‘Well, as you know, I think it’s foolhardy to go on at all, but since you’re determined, and I’m going that way anyhow, I may as well help you out by toting what I can.’

I gratefully accepted this offer of aid, partly out of desperation, and partly because my glimpse of Alasdair’s streak of self-deprecating humor had, as I say, endeared him slightly to me, given me to think he might be more pleasant company than I had hitherto thought, though I still considered him a prig. Thus, as a consequence of the vagaries of fate and a weak jest, I heard the story that sparked the great obsession of my life.

We slogged on to the end of the trail – Alasdair, the two remaining Indians, and I – and, after a good day and a half’s slog on from the top of the Chilkoot pass, reached Lake Bennett. During that time my dislike of Alasdair fast turned to regard, and my regard quickly burgeoned into friendship; he was, in truth, a congenial fellow, and I discovered a warm heart lay beneath his sanctimonious shell.

On the shores of the frozen lake, towered over by hoar-dredged mountains and hemmed in by tenebrous pines, vast numbers of dun-colored tents, brindled here and there with patches of snow, had pullulated, like a fungal blight. As we walked down the path into the encampment we passed many men whipsawing logs into planks for boat-building; it looked wearisome work. I discovered conditions in the teeming canvas city were harsh, squalid, violent. The stampeders there lived in fear of one another, and acrimonious disputes, frequently ending in bloodshed, flared up over the most trivial slights.

Whether I would have noticed all this grimness, without Alasdair at my side to point it out, I do not know – possibly I might still have been bleary eyed with dreams of making my fortune.

Men of all kinds were gathered in the encampment, many of them good. But having my attention directed to the snarling, sniveling, bestial pettiness of the lowest types by the one-

armed Samaritan, led me to realize that, were there gold still in the Klondike, there would be a horrid scuffle over it, one I did not have the stomach for.

I decided then to return to Skagway and secure passage on a boat bound for a port further down the western seaboard. When I announced this intention to Alasdair, he said, if I would have him along, he would like to postpone his trip to Dawson City and accompany me. I was touched, told him I would be glad of his company. He then asked if I had any objection to going back by way of the White Pass Trail, and trying if we could do any good there. He explained that, though this route was less severe than the Chilkoot Trail, in some ways conditions on it were worse, largely because thieves and grifters preyed on the wayfarers. I assented, and, after I sold off my gear (sadly at a great loss) and dismissed my Indians, we set out.

I will not bore you with the details of that fatiguing and fretful journey. The route did not come to be known as the Dead Horse Trail for nothing – it was strewn with the frozen carcasses of horses, ponies, and mules, lying on their backs, four legs stiff in the air like stovepipe hats, hides partially flayed by the wind, ribs poking through like the timbers of wrecked coracles. Our toils were, in small part, recompensed by the fact we aided some stampedeers in straits, though we were unable to convince any of the idiocy of continuing into Canada.

Not long after gaining Skagway, I managed to talk the captain of a steamer, bound for Seattle, into taking me on. I tried to persuade Alasdair to likewise seek a working berth, but he said he preferred to stay on in the frozen North and continue his humanitarian enterprise, meant to head back down the trail once more, make it all the way to Dawson City this time. His eyes filled with sentimental tears when he talked of this duty, which, despite the high esteem I, by that stage, held him in, still irked a mite.

We spent our last evening together in a saloon – a seamy, noisy, sawdust-and-rotgut establishment typical of that place – over a bottle of cheap whiskey (Alasdair’s scruples did not extend to temperance). After a few glasses of the acrid liquor, an enigmatic phrase my friend had employed when we first met, and which I had hitherto forgotten, returned to me, prompting me to ask him a question:

‘You mentioned before you were led astray by the lure of riches. What did you mean by that?’

‘Do you believe there are things that, though beyond the ordinary ken of man, nevertheless mould our lives, weird forces at work?’

‘No, I do not.’

‘Neither did I once. Back then I would have scorned such notions, but now...’

‘Well, you have your belief. I’m not a religious man.’

‘Well, as you know, your lack of faith does shock me. But it was not to God I adverted.’

Then, as we sat there, at the counter, staring into our tumblers like scrying crones, Alasdair told me a bizarre tale as would shock you, and grume your blood, if only I could tell it, a tale set in Glasgow, Scotland, a tale of penury, bloody murder, card-sharping swindles, sham séances, and the realms of the foul olden horrors that prowl the primeval lightless ways that riddle the earth. But to say any more would be to break my word for, as I wrote at the beginning of this account, I promised him then I would not ever divulge it to another soul.

When he was through, my companion took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his brow. Though the fire in the saloon’s grate had died right down, and a biting wind howled in through the open door, he was sweating profusely. Lost for words, I murmured ineffectual condolences. He grinned and turned to me.

‘It’s not your fault. Anyway, it all happened a very long time ago.’

I had been filled with horror by what I had heard, and, seeking to compose myself, I set about filling the bowl of my pipe. After tamping down the weed with my thumb, I held a

match, taken from a pot on the bar, to it, and pulled on the briar's stem. Once the tobacco was burning cheerily, I took a calming draw, and swilled the smoke around my mouth.

‘What did you do then?’ I asked.

Alasdair cradled his stump in his left hand, his arm across his chest. Following the awful caper, he told me, he had fled for North America. On his arrival in the New World after a rough but uneventful crossing of the Atlantic, he had settled in Boston, a town he chose on a mere whim. Many years followed, filled with a slew of tribulations – poverty, hardship, a spell in a labor camp, some time wandering the brutal Old West – before he finally wound up in New York, where he suffered a beating at the hands of a drunken mob and was taken in and nursed back to health by a preacher. Alasdair repaid this kindness by staying on, once recovered, and helping his rescuer, who was aged and doddering, if not doting, with his duties. When the minister died, a few years later, it was only natural that Alasdair take over his flock. He subsequently married a member of the congregation, a beautiful young girl, but she died in childbirth two years after their wedding.

‘That was over a year ago now, though the pain has not paled one bit,’ Alasdair concluded, biting his lip. ‘When I heard of the Klondike Gold Rush and of the stampeders’ hardships, I came out here to wander these frozen lands and offer succor where I could. I have found respite from my grief in ministering and preaching to those in need.’

I said how sorry I was to hear tell of his woes. Smiling wanly, he brushed my expressions of sympathy aside, suggested we eat. This proposal met with my favor, I realized then I was ravenous. While we tucked into some poor fare brought out by the barkeep, it dawned on me that Alasdair's apparent youth could not be reconciled with his account of his life. I challenged him.

‘It is of no consequence to me whether you choose to credit me or not,’ he countered, with some asperity.

I cringed away from him, hurt. Then, an expression of contrition on his countenance, he said, in a tone of mollification.

‘But I am grateful to you for listening. Each time I tell my tale, its burden grows lighter.’

I chewed the morsel of tough, gristly meat in my mouth, described on the menu as lamb, though I doubted this, especially having seen the proprietor of the place buying a broken-down old mule from a stampeder only the day before, then swallowed.

‘I’m sorry. It’s not that I didn’t believe you. I was bemused that’s all.’

‘As for that, all I can say is that I haven’t, in my outward seeming, aged a day since... Well, since then,’ he gave the last word a horrid emphasis, shuddered. ‘I don’t expect you to believe that. I wouldn’t myself if I did not have proof of it every time I look in a glass.’

I nodded, turned the conversation to other topics, sensing it would be futile to press Alasdair further. I am, to this day, unsure whether what he told me was deluded arrant nonsense, a mere pack of lies, or the truth. I quail to consider the latter possibility...

After finishing our food, and sharing another bottle of whiskey, we returned to our lodgings.

I slept poorly that night, apprehensive about the voyage I was to embark on the following morning and disquieted by Alasdair’s ghastly tale. Lying awake on my bunk, I gazed up at the fly-specked ceiling wondering how flies could breed in a country which was so bitterly cold I could not envisage a carcass rotting there, even at the height of summer. Instead, I imagined them pouring forth from a crevice, high up in the mountains, issuing from some vile alterior place.

The following morning was cold and blustery, ragged scraps of white cloud scudded overhead through an ashen sky. Alasdair accompanied me down to the docks. We said our farewells on the wharf, then I walked up the gangplank and boarded the steamer. As the vessel pulled out of the harbor I stood at the taffrail waving to my strange friend. His breath plumed in the cold

air, and it looked as if his spirit had broken free of the hawsers mooring it to the flesh. I watched him until he was little more than a mote in my eye – a dark smut at the point where the yellowish daub of smoke belched from the ship's funnels, and the churned wake, shining in the dim light like a slug's slimy trail, converged – then turned away from the shore, went to report to the boatswain. He assigned me first watch at the bow. I was to keep a lookout for ice floes. Crossing the deck, I took up my position, leaning far out over the gunwale, holding onto the bowsprit to steady myself. For several hours I watched the hatchet prow cleave through the sea. At one point I could have sworn I glimpsed a narwhal's tusk break the surface of the water.

I have never seen Alasdair again. But my encounter with him was like a stone thrown into the pond of my life whose ripples disturbed its hitherto tranquil surface. Unable to get his tale from my thoughts, barbed as it is by weird and sinister implications, I have spent a great deal of time, as this book is testament, seeking others like it. My motives are obscure, even to me. I think it is partly that I sought similar yarns in the hope that, finding them all absurd lies or delusions, I would finally be able to dismiss Alasdair's as falsehood or madness. Too often, however, I found there was a shred of truth to the stories I heard, and over the course of my life I have sewed these scraps into a patchwork of uncanny horror.

## **Appendix II**

### **A Treatise on Horror**

#### **In an Instant, at a Frontier, a Border, a Limit**

Of all the careless suppositions made about horror literature, it is the seemingly innocuous assumption it is a genre that has produced the most wildly distorted accounts. Horror is a series of procedures, a flexible repertoire of effects, a nebulous hybrid of forms: delineating it a genre is to reduce what is a volatile mode to a stable literary category – a theoretical move which dulls horror's edge, and impacts upon practice and reception.

According to the ideas set forth by Bakhtin in one of the key texts on genre, the essay, 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel' (1937-1938, original Russian title, 'Formy vremeni i khronotopa v romane'), time and space are the most important features of any generic form. In that work, Bakhtin states: 'It can [...] be said that it is precisely the chronotope that defines genre and generic distinctions,' (1981b, p.85).<sup>1</sup> He then goes on to describe his concept in the following terms:

In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movement of time, plot and history. (Bakhtin, 1981b, p.84)

For a method of story-telling to be a genre, therefore, it requires a time and place of its own to develop its effects. Horror lacks both these things. It is a transgressive form, involving the



transgression of expectations, of properties, of proprieties, of categories, of boundaries.

Foucault's definition of transgression, which he advances in his essay on Bataille, 'A Preface to Transgression', is of relevance here:

Transgression is an action which involves the limit, that narrow zone of a line where it displays the flash of its passage, but perhaps also its entire trajectory, even its origin; it is likely that transgression has its entire space in the line it crosses. The play of limits and transgression seems to be regulated by a simple obstinacy: transgression incessantly crosses and recrosses a line which closes up behind it in a wave of extremely short duration, and thus it is made to return once more right to the horizon of the uncrossable. (Foucault, 1977, p.34)

The horror mode functions in this way – occurring in an instant, at a frontier, a border, a limit, and living in interstices – at the precise moment a razor blade slices an eyeball, or a character realises that the kindly old man with whom she is talking casts no reflection in a fly-spotted mirror.<sup>ii</sup> Horror is a coup – sudden, violent, unsettling. Like transgression it occurs in a flash and has its entire space in the frontier it crosses. It does not exhibit the fusion of spatial and temporal indicators into one carefully thought-out concrete whole which is characteristic of the artistic literary chronotope.

### **Horror, the Cuckoo**

It is worth now analysing the nature of horror's transgressive operation. A narrative can be considered as a sequence of concatenated components (syntagms) that unfold in succession. A moment of horror is produced by the substitution of an inappropriate element from the set of possible variants of a particular component (the paradigm) for one proper to the sequence. An expected narrative segment (a mirror will reflect what is before it, the dead will remain dead) is switched for a disruptive one. This changeling breaks the chain. Horror arises from and

exists in the resultant rift. This is why it lacks both a place of its own and, occurring in a flash, lacks duration. However, the elements of time and space are crucial to it, for the incursion of the thing of horror must occur at the right instant to be effective and is designed to bring about the transgression of boundaries, to subvert the law of a particular place. It can easily be seen that this mode of functioning is not unique to horror – comedy and wonder also rely on the deployment of the unexpected at precisely the right moment with the aim of bringing about spatial transformation.

The reason these transgressive arts make use of similar tactics is that underlying them all is the imaginative use of memory. De Certeau, in his *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1980, original French title, *L'Invention du Quotidien: Volume 1, Arts de Faire*) describes the workings of memory in the following terms:

Memory mediates spatial transformations. In the mode of the “right point in time” [...] it produces a founding rupture or break. Its foreignness makes possible a transgression of the law of the place [...] A supplementary stroke, and it will be “right.” In order for there to be a practical “harmony,” there is lacking only a little something, a scrap which becomes precious in these particular circumstances and which the invisible treasury of the memory will provide. (Certeau, 1984, pp.85-86)

Of course, in horror literature the writer introduces eldritch and grotesque products of his memory and imagination to disturb, to make strange, not to bring about a harmonious state, but, in many respects, the moment of horror can be understood as being very similar to de Certeau's ‘supplementary stroke’. Another of de Certeau's assertions about memory also provides an insight into the operations of horror. He claims it, ‘[l]ike those birds that lay their eggs only in other species' nests, [...] produces in a place that does not belong to it,’ (Certeau, 1984, p.86). Likewise horror, which lacks a place of its own, requires a true literary genre as a propagating medium, an excipient. An entire narrative can never be solely constructed of moments of horror, with the exception of very short tales that cannot sustain themselves.

It is clear, however, from the way horror is so widely described as being a genre, that the moment of horror will infect the form that carries it and come to dominate the entire narrative.<sup>iii</sup> The following observation of Jean-Paul Sartre's, made in his monograph, *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions* (1939, original French title, *Esquisse d'une théorie des émotions*) offers an explanation for why this is the case: 'to experience any object as horrible, is to see it against the background of a world which reveals itself as *already* horrible,' (Sartre, 2002, pp.59-60).

Mode would seem an apt term for this kind of narrative device. The fact horror is a mode is not sufficient to mark it out, though, for there are many others – for example comedy and pornography.<sup>iv</sup> Therefore, a more complex definition is required to delineate horror.

### **Terror, the Grotesque, and the Uncanny**

One key, and hopefully uncontroversial, axiom of this treatise is that horror literature aims at generating horror in its reader (the writer of this treatise will write mainly of 'readers' – in most cases, however, the word 'viewer' could easily be interpolated). It is, therefore, necessary to offer a definition of this emotion. The entry for horror in the Oxford English Dictionary runs as follows:

A painful emotion compounded of loathing and fear; a shuddering with terror and repugnance; strong aversion mingled with dread; the feeling excited by something shocking or frightful. (Oxford English Dictionary online)

Horror, then, is more than just terror, according to this dictionary definition. It is terror mixed with disgust. This would seem to accord with the thinking of theoreticians and practitioners of horror fictions. The philosopher Noël Carroll, author of the influential work on horror cinema, *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart* (1990), asserts, in his essay 'A Paradox

of the Heart: A Response to Alex Neill' (1992), that '[t]he emotion that in large part identifies the genre of horror is a compound of fear and disgust,' (p.72). In his 1981 study of horror literature, *Danse Macabre*, Stephen King, arguably the most famous of all writers in the field, premises a hierarchy of emotional effects in which he locates horror between the poles of terror and revulsion:

[T]error on top, horror below it, and lowest of all, the gag reflex of revulsion [...] I recognize terror as the finest emotion and so I will try to terrorize the reader. But if I find that I cannot terrify, I will try to horrify, and if I find that I cannot horrify, I'll go for the gross-out. I'm not proud. (p.37)

From this it may be assumed that King also understands horror to be a compound of fear and disgust. It is worth noting that, in his theoretical schema, terror is placed above horror as the 'finest emotion'. This is disingenuous; in practice he does not privilege pure fear, as a quick scan of any of his novels will attest. But it is a commonly-held prejudice – terror is seen as a more moral and profound emotion than horror: to terrify, an aesthetic achievement, to horrify, sordid, somehow reprehensible. King's gradation is probably a sop to critics who, he claims, accuse him of 'selling death and disfigurement and monstrosity; [...] trading upon hate and violence, morbidity and loathing; [being] just another representative of those forces of chaos which so endanger the world today [...] in short, immoral,' (King, 1981, p.367).

The fact the guardians of probity – closely allied, of course, with those of law and order – find works generating terror alone less reprehensible than those producing horror (terror and repugnance) points to the truth of the case: horror is a more potent emotion than mere terror, constituting a challenge to prevailing epistemological conditions; after all, who is to say all forces of chaos are intrinsically evil? This will be discussed in greater depth later in this treatise. It is apt here, though, to quote from the Czech film-maker Jan Svankmajer's introduction to his 2005 film *Sílení* (UK title *Lunacy*): 'This is a horror film, with all the

degeneracy peculiar to that genre [...] it is not a work of art.’<sup>v</sup> The horror mode mounts an attack on conventional decorum, and is, consequently, excluded from the field of the aesthetic as prescribed by the elite.

What precisely is the nature of the horror effect of horror fictions? It has been argued above that horror is a more powerful emotion than terror alone, due to its component of revulsion. A work that illustrates this is Arthur Machen’s *The Three Imposters* (1895). It, due to visceral descriptive passages, holds the reader in a fierce grip despite involuted plotting that might otherwise vitiate suspense and terror. In his introduction to the J.M. Dent edition of this novel, David Trotter makes an assertion that offers an explanation as to why disgust heightens and transforms the sensation of terror:

Disgust foreshadows horror because it allows us to witness, in the course of ordinary experience, the momentary abolition of the categories which define and sustain ordinary experience. (Trotter, 1995, pp.xxv-xxvi)

The mimetically permissible anomalies of the disgusting – the viscid substance which is both a liquid and solid at the same time, the innards which should be inside the body, but have spilled out – prepare the reader for utterly fantastic violations of the moment of horror; the boundaries between the possible and the impossible being already blurred, the impossible thing of horror can seep into the ‘real’ of the text.

An obvious, but nevertheless, crucial corollary of the idea the emotion of horror is compounded of terror and disgust is the fact that the object which causes it is not only frightening, but also grotesque. This is important because the grotesque does not solely engender disgust, it simultaneously excites desire; it exerts a powerful attraction at the same time as it repulses. Baudelaire’s poem ‘A Carcass’ (1857, original French title, ‘Une charogne’) – a portrayal, in sensuous verse, of the fly-blown corpse of a woman the poet stumbled across, one beautiful June morning, while strolling with his lover – exemplifies this:

Her legs were spread out like a lecherous whore,  
 Sweating out poisonous fumes,  
 Who opened in slick invitational style  
 Her stinking and festering womb. (Baudelaire, 1993a, p.59)

The grotesque gives rise to a nauseous vacillation between desire and revulsion in the individual who confronts it, a strange, anomalous mental state.

In *Powers of Horror* (1980, original French title, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur: essai sur l'abjection*), Julia Kristeva describes a very similar psychological condition, which she terms abjection. The abject has a terrible allure:

There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire. (1982, p.1)

The abject threatens the distinction between subject and object, between self and the other, threatens sense: 'what is *abject* [...] is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses,' (Kristeva, 1982, p.2). Therefore, the subject must spurn the abject, or risk a descent into incoherence:

[D]esire [...] nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects. (Kristeva, 1982, p.1).

An encounter with the abject has the effect of eroding meaning because it recalls to the subject his primal act of abjection, when he 'reject[ed] and thr[ew] up everything [...] given to him – all gifts, all objects [...] and constitute[d] his own territory, edged by the abject,' (Kristeva, 1982, p.6):

Abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be. (Kristeva, 1982, p.10)

The abject is not only an assault on the individual's subjecthood and on the mechanisms by which he or she constitutes a coherent picture of the world, but also his or her reaction to this threat – the repetition of the primal rejection.

Kristeva argues that certain repugnant things, in particular things that recall human materiality, give rise to abjection (a fact that further confirms the close relationship between the grotesque and the abject): 'A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, [...] refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live,' (1982, p.3). The subject is forced into a traumatic confrontation with death (which is distinct from an intellectual appreciation of the fact of death), and the mental barrier he or she has erected between subject and object (this occurs most violently when a corpse is encountered, for it literally is the subject become object, though wounds and so forth do powerfully hint at the materiality of the flesh) without which the individual can have no identity.

Horror (terror plus the grotesque) can therefore give rise to abjection, something that suggests a possible reason why horror fictions are more unsettling, more disconcerting than those that evoke fear alone, for, where fear defines the subject as necessarily distinct from the threatening other, horror, through the abjection it engenders, disturbs subjecthood, points to the fact that the individual is one with the other which he or she tries so vehemently to reject:

If it be true that the abject simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject, one can understand that it is experienced at the peak of its strength when that subject, weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the

impossible within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very being, that it is no other than abject. (Kristeva, 1982, p.5)

In fact, from this it can be seen that some horror writing, through the abjection it engenders, has the power to challenge one of the fundamental assumptions of the post-Enlightenment era – the sanctity of the subject. The abject violates the most sacred ontological boundary of contemporary life in the West, that which circumscribes the individual and separates him or her from the other.

When laced with revulsion, then, fear can become profoundly disconcerting. It is this fact which differentiates horror from terror. On the basis of it, the dictionary definition quoted above can be seen to be insufficient, partial. To refine it – horror is terror made unsettling. This is key, for deploying the grotesque is not the sole method by which terror can be transformed into horror. There is another, that of combining fear with a sense of the uncanny. Arguably, it is to an eldritch unease that many horror fictions owe their power (maybe it is not pure terror, but terror plus the uncanny to which King really refers to when he talks of the ‘finest emotion’).

Freud, in his essay ‘The “Uncanny”’ (1919, original German title, ‘Das “Unheimliche”’), identifies two main situations that give rise to the uncanny sensation. The first is ‘when infantile complexes which have been repressed are once more revived by some impression,’ and the second is ‘when primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed,’ (Freud, 1955, p.249).

As exemplars of the first class of trigger Freud gives doubles, bodies in pieces, and premature burial. The double, originally created as ‘an insurance against the destruction of the ego,’ becomes uncanny once the stage of primary narcissism has been surmounted because, ‘[f]rom having been an assurance of immortality, it becomes the uncanny harbinger of death,’ (Freud, 1955, p.235). A severed head or dismembered limb is uncanny, particularly so if it is ‘capable of independent activity in addition,’ because it evokes ‘the castration complex,’



(Freud, 1955, p.244). And the peculiar horror some people have of being buried alive is interpreted by Freud as ‘a transformation of [a] phantasy which originally had nothing terrifying about it, [that] of intra-uterine existence,’ (Freud, 1955, p.244). That these three images recur frequently in horror fictions strongly suggests the truth of the link, put forward here, between horror and the uncanny.

Freud, in his monograph, asserts ‘the uncanny [*unheimlich*] is something which is secretly familiar [*heimlich-heimisch*], which has undergone repression and then returned from it,’ (1955, p.245). The ghoul of the abject is once more invoked by this claim. It could be postulated things are uncanny because they recall a specific stage of the individual’s development, one shrouded in mystery and discomfiting to him or her, the moment during which the individual assumed a coherent identity, and that the uncanny is the experience of being forced to confront once again the chaos that existed before he or she was constituted as a subject. Freud’s three examples can each be given an interpretation supporting this argument – they can be argued to represent a trajectory that regresses the individual back through his or her prelinguistic phases. The double is the reflection in the mirror by identification with which the infant mentally constructs him- or herself as whole and complete; the dismembered body represents the infant’s experience of him- or herself, prior to this, as a fragmentary body; and finally, a fear of being buried alive is the distorted return of the submerged memory of the time before the subject, through abjection, established boundaries between the self and the (maternal) other, represents being swallowed up once more by formlessness, and the (maternal) other (abjection precedes the mirror stage, according to Kristeva, is a precondition of it). Viewed in this light, it is clear Freud’s first category of the uncanny, like the grotesque, is closely associated with abjection.

Horror’s most basic plots are also uncanny because they summon up the moment of abjection. They often revolve around a border between a ‘real’ (mimetic) and an imaginary realm – generally either a character from the ‘real’ crosses into the imaginary, or some

fantastic entity irrupts into the everyday world. In the former scenario, the character and, by identification, readers are forced to confront their severance, by abjection, from the limitless possibilities of the imaginary realm through a narrative of an impossible return to it; in the latter, the abjected (maternal) other returns to torment the subject.

Freud's second class of the uncanny is the apparent confirmation of an atavistic system of belief which leads 'back to the old, animistic conception of the universe,' (Freud, 1955, p.241). Horror narratives often evoke this olden phase of human development, when language could mould the world, in their depiction of the casting of spells, cursing, and the chanting of incantations. This raises for the reader the spectre of the evil contained in the fiction being reified in the world. Faced with this threat the reader will seek to reject the text, but, enthralled by the strange power the reification of language seems to offer him or her as a user of words, will be unable to do so. In this way, Freud's second category of the uncanny also recalls abjection, in this case a primal social abjection that occurred at an early stage of humankind's development:

[B]y way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder. (Kristeva, 1982, pp.12-13)

Therefore, the uncanny transforms terror into horror for the same reason the grotesque does – it forces the reader to confront the abject. In fact, it could be asserted the grotesque and the uncanny are simply the visceral and cerebral experiences of the same sensation (as bliss and happiness are).

However, Kristeva argues that abjection, though related to the uncanny, is not the same kind of experience, is more extreme:

Essentially different from "uncanniness," more violent, too, abjection is elaborated through a failure to recognize its kin; nothing is familiar, not even the shadow of a memory. (Kristeva, 1982, p.5)

The reason horror (as terror plus the uncanny) evokes abjection, is because fear and the uncanny conjoined serve to recall the primal moment when the subject created the border or separation between it and the other more powerfully than a sense of the uncanny on its own. This is because fear was also present then, was, indeed, the driving force of the act, the fear of having 'swallowed up [one's] parents too soon,' (Kristeva, 1982, p.5).

If it is true that horror is a mode evoking abjection, it is consequently one that transgresses the laws by which both symbolic and political orders generate the dualist oppositions that allow them to produce meaning:

One might [...] say that with [...] a literature [that confronts abjection] there takes place a crossing over of the dichotomous categories of Pure and Impure, Prohibition and Sin, Morality and Immorality. (Kristeva, 1982, p.16)

This is one reason why horror fictions are horrifying – they force the reader to interrogate the categories by which he or she makes sense of the world.

Of course, most horror narratives draw back from abjection and conclude with a restitution of order which halts the decay of the subject and of political and ethical categories. Indeed, this is precisely the thrill of many horror fictions, the experience of ontological and epistemological limits contained within a framework which precludes any danger of utter dissolution. There are, however, texts where the disintegration is not checked, where the narrative is a bleak spiral of undoing.

To conclude this section, it is worth noting that, when discussing instances of the uncanny occurring in fictional narratives, Freud argues the first class of the uncanny, that preceding from repressed complexes, is 'resistant and remains as powerful in fiction as in real

experience,’ but that the second, that arising from the agitation of atavistic memories of the animistic phase of humanity, retains its disturbing effect only in mimetic literature, ‘retain[ing] its character not only in experience but in fiction as well, so long as the setting is one of material reality,’ (Freud, 1955, p.251). This would suggest there is a special relationship between horror and the genre of realism, something which will be explored later in this treatise.

### **The Paradox of Horror**

Given that all the resources of horror narratives are mustered in an effort to produce what would seem to be an intrinsically unpleasant sensation, why do people read them? One well-known answer to this question was proposed by the analytic philosopher and film theoretician Noël Carroll in his 1990 monograph, *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart*. In this book, Carroll formulates the above problematic with reference to David Hume’s famed essay ‘Of Tragedy’, and in resolving it relies heavily on Hume’s argument that the audience’s pleasure in tragedy is chiefly aesthetic, taken in artful plotting.

Carroll’s solution to the paradox of horror could be termed cognitivist. First he terms the emotion horror narratives produce in their viewers or readers, ‘art-horror’, to distance it from what he calls ‘natural horror’ which is felt in real situations in an individual’s life. Then he proposes that works in the genre are defined by their depiction of horrific beings, and, after an enumeration of a number of encounters with monsters taken from horror fictions, concludes that ‘[w]ithin the context of the horror narrative, [...] monsters are identified as impure and unclean [...] [regarded] not only with fear but with loathing, with a combination of terror and disgust,’ (Carroll, 1990, p.23). In a refinement of a position drawn from the study, *Purity and Danger*, by anthropologist Mary Douglas, Carroll contests that these beings ‘are impure [because] categorically interstitial, categorically contradictory, incomplete, or formless,’

(Carroll, 1990, p.32).<sup>vi</sup> Creatures such as werewolves, vampires, and the ilk, he avers, transgress the ontological boundaries by which human beings make sense of the world.

But the impure status of such beings, as well as frightening and disgusting, also engages the audience's curiosity:

[O]bjects of art-horror are, by definition, impure. This is to be understood in terms of their being anomalous. Obviously, the anomalous nature of these beings is what makes them disturbing, distressing, and disgusting. They are violations of our ways of classifying things and such frustrations of a world-picture are bound to be disturbing. However, anomalies are also interesting. The very fact that they are anomalies fascinates us. Their deviation from the paradigms of our classificatory scheme captures our attention immediately. (Carroll, 1990, p.188)

This fascination, Carroll argues, overwhelms the distress the audience feels. First, as fictional creations, the horror the beings command is muted, the audience feels the safety of an aesthetic distance. Second, Carroll contends that the narrative forms of these works are structured around disclosure and discovery, and that, therefore, the audience's 'curiosity, fascination, and [...] cognitive inquisitiveness are engaged, addressed, and sustained in a highly articulated way through [...] the drama of proof and such processes of continuous revelation as ratiocination, discovery, hypothesis formation, confirmation, and so on,' (1990, p.190). As a consequence, the pleasures of fascination 'outweigh whatever negative feelings such anomalous creatures make probable,' (Carroll, 1990, p.196).

Thus Carroll dissolves the paradox of horror; consumers of horror fictions do not take pleasure in the horror itself, but in a highly structured plot that unfolds deliberately, offering teasing glimpses of the object of horror, but withholds, until the climactic moment, sight of the abomination. Carroll's solution is depended with considerable skill and ingenuity, and his study offers many valuable insights into the nature of horror fictions. However, the theory he advances to account for the fact that viewers (and readers) seek out fictions which both

frighten and repulse them, seems an attempt to impute a single unequivocal origin for a complex and contradictory impulse. There are a number of reasons to repudiate it.

It would seem Carroll is privileging in his discussion a certain kind of mainstream horror cinema in which the object of phenomenological disruption is the subject of an investigation by characters in the work itself, thus generating a hermeneutic drive, that the audience, by identification, is caught up in. It could, however, be argued that these sorts of narratives are not in the horror mode at all. In them, the monster or thing whose nature is being enquired into is not really horrifying, does not represent a break or rupture, but is a pretext upon which a narrative structure offering the pleasures Carroll describes can be established. Carroll's argument is simply not borne out by empirical evidence; horror is more multifarious than his solution allows for. The types of films Carroll's discussion focuses upon might perhaps be best viewed as a separate genre altogether: the monster genre. If Carroll's conceptual model admitted application to all horror narratives there would be no reason for them to exist at all. Detective fictions would seem particularly suited to engaging an audience's ratiocination drives, and do not have the drawback of horrifying them. A more prosaic objection is that audiences and readers seem to want to be scared, will denigrate a horror story for not being horrifying enough. Never, however, would a horror fan criticise a work for not stimulating his or her exegetic faculties. Can we imagine the following exchange?

Bob: What did you think of *Blood Rite IV: The Witching Hour*?

Pete: Not bad, though it didn't sufficiently engage my ratiocination drive...

Returning to this treatise's initial hypothesis, it can be asserted that, as horror is a mode not a genre, it can occur within narrative structures which are not focussed on disclosure and discovery, and do not thus offer the pleasure offered by Carroll as a solution to the paradox he examines. Indeed, horror occurs with greatest effect in the aimless narrative trajectories characteristic of mimetic fictions. As the moment of horror disrupts a syntagmatic chain of

signification, it cannot truly exist within a tale characterised by ratiocination. The ontological shock of the moment of horror tears the text, causes a rift, and this would derail the drama of proof posited by Carroll. Thus, we have come no closer to understanding why people are drawn to these products that generate an unpleasant emotional response.

Another way of attempting to dissolve the paradox of horror could be termed expressivist, and goes back to Aristotle. Berys Gaut describes it, in his article ‘The Paradox of Horror’ (1993), as follows: ‘we do not enjoy the negative emotions that horror engenders, but, rather, we enjoy the expression of these emotions, by which we relieve ourselves of them, or lighten the grip they have on us,’ (article not paginated). In its simplest form this ‘holds that the process is akin to unburdening oneself of emotions by engaging in acts of make-believe (for instance, getting rid of one’s anger by imagining kicking someone),’ (Gaut, 1993). The flaw in this reasoning is that the expression of fear, unlike the expression of sadness or anger is not cathartic. Horror exacerbates, heightens the capacity to feel horror. This is an accepted truth of psychology and physiology. Edgar Allan Poe expresses it rather more fancifully in his essay ‘Marginalia’.<sup>vii</sup>

There are moments when, even to the sober eye of Reason, the world of our sad humanity must assume the aspect of Hell; but the Imagination of Man is no Carathis, to explore with impunity its every cavern. Alas! the grim legion of sepulchral terrors cannot be regarded as altogether fanciful; but like the Demons in whose company Afrasiab made his voyage down the Oxus, they must sleep, or they will devour us – they must be suffered to slumber, or we perish.... (Poe, 1998, p.36)

Gaut also discusses a more sophisticated version of the expressivist solution, one which overlaps with the cognitivist view: ‘one lightens one’s emotions by coming to understand what was before an unknown perturbation,’ (Gaut, 1993). The same reasoning as before, however, can be mobilised to invalidate this line of thinking. In the case of a perturbation that is known, there is a value in exploring, in art, the unpleasant emotions it produces. Fictions

about war, social deprivation, and violent crime, for example, can allow individuals to evaluate their responses to these phenomena in a safe context, shielded by the aesthetic distance. They may lighten the burden of anxiety about such things. But what could be the value in engendering a fear of something that is not only unknown, but also supernatural (and thus, for the vast majority of consumers, impossible), as the object of horror frequently is? Would it not be better to let such irrational fears sleep? Of course, it could be argued that horror texts express contemporary issues in a metaphorical form. However, their allegories are most frequently too diffuse to allow them to be read as direct expressions of some real historical concern. To attempt to do so would ignore the contradictory currents at play in the fiction of horror, ignore the disruptive effect engendered by the moment of horror. As André Breton argues in 'Limits Not Frontiers of Surrealism' (1936, original French title, 'Limites non frontières du surréalisme'):

A work of art worthy of the name is one which gives us back the freshness of the [terrifying] emotions of childhood. This can only happen on the express condition that it does not depend directly on the history of current events whose profound echoes in the heart of man can only make themselves felt by the systematic return to fiction. (1971, p.109)

Fiction (by which Breton means narratives that are resolutely unrealistic, stories that might be termed fantastic) may express echoes of historical and social anxieties, but in a form that can only be felt, not understood. Works in which the thing of horror denotes a particular perturbation, and whose consumers might feel an alleviation of a specific fear, are merely a small, often trite, subset of the horror mode. The expressivist solution cannot explain horror's appeal.

Gaut also rejects expressivism; he endorses an enjoyment theory: 'horror attracts because people can enjoy being scared and disgusted,' (Gaut, 1993). His argument is intricate. He discusses theories which propose a view of the emotions that posit an evaluative process



interceding between the object of the emotion and the emotional response. Hence, ‘necessarily typically, if someone negatively evaluates a state of affairs and she is relevantly informed about it, she will find that state of affairs unpleasant,’ (Gaut, 1993). Because these conceptual connections are of the form ‘necessarily typically,’ ‘there is plenty of scope for the enjoyment of these emotions in atypical situations, [...] [this] allows the aficionados of horror to enjoy their fear and disgust,’ (Gaut, 1993). However, ‘these atypical responses are only possible against a background in which people do not enjoy these negative emotions,’ (Gaut, 1993). Once these axioms have been established, Gaut moves to dissolve the paradox of horror:

[The] paradox rests on the claim that the enjoyment of negative emotions, understood as intrinsically unpleasant emotions, is impossible. The paradox seems to arise only because we construe the negativity in terms of these emotions being intrinsically unpleasant, whereas we should really construe their negativity in terms of the fact that the emotions essentially incorporate negative evaluations. But this entails that typically people will find the objects of these emotions unpleasant and the emotions themselves are typically unpleasant. Thus it is wrong to hold that whether people enjoy these emotions or not is a merely contingent, non-conceptual matter. But because there is only a conceptual requirement that people typically don’t enjoy them, that allows room for some individuals on some occasions to enjoy them. (Gaut, 1993)

Of course this is a highly technical solution, no doubt fully accessible only to a philosopher who has engaged with all the abstruse theories that are cited to support it (for the author of this treatise its full implications are glimpsed only out of the corner of the eye, like lightning). And there is no denying it is an elegant one. However, it could be argued that Gaut’s position involves divorcing the object of horror from the context in which it occurs. Undeniably, he demonstrates it is possible to enjoy experiencing typically horrible situations both in life and in art, but he does not take into account the sophisticated operations of the

narrative of a horror fiction. The pleasure he appears to be discussing is an unnuanced visceral thrill taken, perversely, from the object of horror itself. This may be because he sees the aesthetic structures of horror texts as beneath serious scrutiny: ‘the majority of horror works lack any serious artistic worth [...] [t]hey are pure entertainment: they aim simply at providing their audience with enjoyable experiences,’ (Gaut, 1993). Therefore, while Gaut’s proposition is, in the opinion of this writer, flawless, it actually has little relevance to horror fictions. In these texts the emotional response the object of horror would give rise to in isolation is unimportant. The horror evoked by horror texts arises, not from this object, but from the manner in which it irrupts into the narrative – strictly in the interstices caused by the rupture of the signifying chain. Gaut has disregarded the essential component of horror, the abject, which is brought about by ontological disruption.

In fact, to return to the first position outlined in this section, Carroll’s, it can be seen that, though it is problematic, it is the most persuasive of all the above solutions to the paradox of horror. His notion that the monsters, or objects of horror in horror narratives both repulse and attract because they are categorial violations is very close to the thesis postulated in the foregoing section that the object of horror is abject. Still, the fact remains that Carroll’s argument falters. There are three main reasons why it does so. First, because it locates the source of the ontological disturbance in the monster, or object of horror. In fact, while the disturbance is the product of the horrifying thing’s incursion, it exists independently of it (horror can bleed out and infect an entire narrative). Second, because it suggests a basic hermeneutic drive lies behind the pleasure to be derived from horror texts. Roland Barthes claims in his *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973, original French title, *Le plaisir du texte*), narrative tears – such as those caused by the irruption of a thing of horror – are anathema to this simple pleasure.

In [the case of the pleasure of the corporeal striptease or of narrative suspense], there is no tear, no edges: a gradual unveiling: the entire excitation takes refuge in the hope

of seeing the sexual organ (schoolboy's dream) or in knowing the end of the story (novelistic satisfaction). (1990, p.10)

Horror does not engage in a striptease. Its excitement does not take refuge in the hope of seeing the object of horror, in a satisfaction of curiosity that outweighs the distress and disgust caused. Horror is a sudden assault that reveals all, all at once, and which is dreaded, from which the reader cowers. The moment of the onslaught is not foreshadowed by glimpses that serve to intrigue and lessen its eventual impact as Carroll claims. Its harbingers are moments that elicit disgust and undermine the walls of being and subjecthood in advance of its appearance. Even in monster films of the kind Carroll specifically discusses, when the corpse of a victim is found – counter to what would be expected in a narrative of deduction, a tale from the detective genre – the initial response of both character and reader or viewer is not reasoning, but recoil; any ratiocination occurs later, after the moment of horror has past.

The third failing of Carroll's thesis is that it would seem to imply the degree of horror is inversely proportional to the pleasure derived. But if this were the case a benign object that evoked the same degree of curiosity could be simply be substituted (it is not difficult to imagine a friendly categorial violation). Horror and pleasure, in truth, would actually seem to be commensurate; the more horrifying the irruption, the greater the disruption, the more enjoyable readers will find the narrative.

In fact, none of the theories explored in this section have, to this writer's thinking, satisfactorily resolved the paradox of horror postulated at the beginning. Yet it is undeniable that readers enjoy horror narratives. What form does their pleasure take if it is not ratiocinative, nor cathartic, nor visceral?

## The Text that Shows its Behind to the Political Father

Barthes argues for a '[p]roximity (identity?) of bliss and fear,' and also asserts that bliss can arise from 'a *disfiguration* of the language,' (1990, pp.48, 37). The moment of horror brings about a disfiguration of the language of narrative. It is 'an extreme continually shifted, an empty, mobile, unpredictable extreme,' which gives rise to the '[p]leasure in pieces; language in pieces; culture in pieces,' by which the text of pleasure is defined (Barthes, 1990, pp.52, 51).<sup>viii</sup>

The pleasure of horror fiction is analogous to that taken in the text which is 'the uninhibited person who shows his behind to the *Political Father*,' (Barthes, 1990, p.53). By which it is not meant that horror tales necessarily address particular ideological concerns (though they may do), but rather that the form itself is in some manner contestational.

## The Witch's Line

It is useful to employ Deleuze's concept of minor literature to understand why this might be the case.<sup>ix</sup> In the essay 'Literature and Life' (original French title, 'La Littérature et la vie'), from *Essays Critical and Clinical* (1993, original French title, *Critique et Clinique*), he argues that the effect of literature on language is to:

[Open] up a kind of foreign language within language, which is neither another language not a rediscovered patois, but a becoming-other of language, a minorization of [...] major language, a delirium that carries it off, a witch's line that escapes the dominant system. (1997b, p.5)<sup>x</sup>

Minor literature is literature that shocks, disconcerts, provokes experience, shatters the bland and restrictive consensus of opinion.

But why are works of this kind contestational? Ronald Bogue explains in his essay, 'Minor Writing and Minor Literature' (1999), that, in Deleuze's and Guattari's view:

The object of language is not communication, but the inculcation of *mots d'ordre* – "slogans", "watchwords," but also literally "words of order," the dominant orthodox ways of classifying, organizing and explaining the world. (pp. 107-108)

The 'witch's line,' the flight Deleuze calls deterritorialization, is contestational because it is disruptive. It involves acting upon an instruction inherent in *mots d'ordre*, the very discourses by which the powerful seek to affirm and maintain their authority. *Mots d'ordre* transmit a death sentence or judgement. Deleuze and Guattari note, in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980, original French title, *Capitalisme et Schizophrénie 2: Mille Plateaux*), that they therefore also act as 'a warning cry, or a message to flee,' like a lion's roar, 'which enunciates flight and death simultaneously,' (2004b, p. 118).

Therefore, immanent within the dominant language there are lines of continuous variation along which it is possible to deterritorialize, take flight. Doing so is subversive, constitutes an attack on the maternal tongue by which the powerful promulgate the idea of their dominance. Thus, '[w]hen writers efficaciously experiment with language [...] they do not simply manipulate signifiers [...] [t]hey experiment on the real,' (Bogue, 1999, p.108).

Horror texts, as they contain moments in which language, narrative, and sense are overthrown, transgressed, are minor, deterritorializing, contestational. Indeed, '[t]he writer [of minor literature] returns from what he has seen and heard with bloodshot eyes and pierced eardrums,' (Deleuze, 1997b, p.3). Minor works are always horror texts.

However, though horror as a mode contains within it the seeds of deterritorialization, many texts will aggressively reterritorialize, explicitly support hegemonic praxis by destroying, repelling, abjecting the thing of horror. Still, it remains the case there is inherent

in horror fictions the potential for subversion. It is this encrypting of transgression that ultimately attracts readers to the form.

### **The Worm-Eaten Real**

Structurally, the moment of horror is the substitution of an expected term of a narrative sequence for one that is distressing – it is a stone cast at a mirror which shivers the glass. Just as this would be most unsettling if the image reflected had been taken for real (the mirror true, limpid, not distorting, or tarnished) it is most disturbing to encounter horror in a work that simulates the world. The moment of horror can occur within any generic form, but has a special relationship with mimesis – it is there its effect is most diabolical.

This is because the power of horror fictions to horrify is not immanent in the object of horror, but in the rift its irruption into the work causes. Though it may engender fear through the reader's identification with a character in peril, an encounter with a monstrous entity in a realm of prodigies and wonders will not give rise to the horrifying rupture. The generic conventions of fantasy texts serve to lessen the disturbance engendered by their threats. They often place the fantasy world at a distance from the reader, sometimes by explicit textual indicators (a long time ago, in a land far, far away). They also generally circumscribe and contain any disruptions they might depict by privileging internal coherence (in many fantasy texts there is no place for epistemological violations – the events and things they describe may overturn the reader's empirical reality, but will still be consistent with the laws of the meticulously constructed world in which the tale is set), and often by deploying consolationist plot arcs (the object of the quest is found, good defeats evil) that create narrative closure.

Therefore, fantasy narratives cannot horrify; any threats they depict will not sap the edifice of the reader's subjecthood, or vitiate the mechanisms by which he or she makes sense of the world, furthermore, they are always over an uncrossable border from him or her.

When something fantastic and terrifying irrupts into a narrative constructed according to the conventions of realism the reader confronts (both directly and vicariously, through the characters, for whom the encounter is also anomalous) transgression – the divisions separating the categories of experience by which he or she makes sense of the world are torn down by the thing that has crossed the border from the imaginary realm to enter the ‘real’ world.

The incursion of the fantastic thing is only one of two basic plot devices whereby horror is engendered. The other involves the depiction of a character passing from a ‘real’ space, a place described employing mimetic techniques, into another domain where the laws of the first are inverted. The character either remains trapped in the alterior space, or returns to the ‘real’. The former of these alternative outcomes of the second basic horror plot is disquieting because it suggests to the reader the possibility of being lost to an imaginary realm where sense collapses. The latter, despite initial appearances, is perhaps even more unsettling, for the character, in returning to the ‘real’ will find the familiar corrupted, made strange. De Certeau offers a compelling reason why this is so:

[I]n [...] coming back within the enclosure the traveller henceforth finds there the exteriority that he had first sought by going outside and then fled by returning. Within the frontiers, the alien is already there, an exoticism or sabbath of the memory, a disquieting familiarity. (Certeau, 1988, p.128)

Many horror fictions also enact the transgression of boundaries at a metalevel, by seeking to erode the borders of the text itself. This can be effected by a number of means. A first person narrator who constantly asserts the truth of what he or she tells creates a verisimilitude that augments the impact of the moment when the fantastic enters the tale. Complex, multi-layered narrative structures, especially those involving storytelling, seem to corrode textual borders – the tale bleeds out, the reader’s reading becomes just another frame. Employing forms traditionally used to convey ‘truths’ – the scientific study, the historical monograph, the

newspaper article, the legal case history – is disturbing because credibility inheres in their discourses. Similarly, narratives shamming as found manuscripts distress because their status as fictions is thrown into doubt. All these techniques further weaken the reader's faith in the divisions by which he or she makes sense of the world – they force him or her to interrogate the categories of the real and the fictive and to question all that is presented to him or her as truth.

If horror texts are seen as the corruption of a space of realism by absolute alterity, it follows that the other of these narratives must be fantastic.<sup>xi</sup> Perhaps the best known and most influential theory of the fantastic is Tzvetan Todorov's *The Fantastic – A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (1970, original French title, *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*). In this monograph, Todorov discusses a number of literary texts, drawn in the main from nineteenth-century French literature, in which:

In a world which is indeed our world [...] there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. (1980, p.25)

This is also the way horror texts function. However, Todorov argues that the defining feature of the fantastic is that:

The person who experiences the [fantastic] event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses [...] and the laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place [...] [and] reality is controlled by laws unknown to us [...] The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. (Todorov, 1980, p.25)

Here Todorov's model departs from that which governs horror. Because the thing of horror is always radically other, though horror tales may tormentingly proffer the possibility the narrator is deluded, the hesitation proper to Todorov's pure fantastic is not maintained. The



moment of horror will corrupt absolutely the signifying chain into which it is inserted, and horror is, therefore, always resolved on the side of what Todorov terms the ‘fantastic-marvellous’, ‘the class of narratives that are presented as fantastic and that end with an acceptance of the supernatural,’ (1980, p.52). However, as these ‘are the narratives closest to the pure fantastic, for the latter, by the very fact that it remains unexplained, unrationalized suggest the existence of the supernatural,’ Todorov’s analysis of the fantastic can still offer some insight into the way horror fictions function (Todorov, 1980, p.52).

It is Todorov’s claim that the fantastic narratives he examines offered a challenge to the epistemological model that prevailed in the era in which they were written (the Age of Empiricism):

The literature of the fantastic leaves us with two notions: that of reality and that of literature, each as unsatisfactory as the other. The nineteenth century transpired [...] in a metaphysics of the real and the imaginary, and the literature of the fantastic is nothing but the bad conscience of this positivist era. (Todorov, 1980, p.168)

In Todorov’s view, a paradigm shift in the early years of the twentieth century has brought about a different way of conceiving reality, and the fantastic as he conceives it, which had evolved to function antagonistically within the surpassed set of conditions, has died out:

But today, we can no longer believe in an immutable, external reality, nor in a literature which is merely the transcription of such a reality. Words have gained an autonomy which things have lost [...] Fantastic literature itself – which on every page subverts linguistic categorizations – has received a fatal blow from these very categorizations. (1980, p.168)

Todorov does not see this moment as the end of the fantastic, however, only of the particular form of it his work probes: ‘[the] death, [the] suicide generates a new literature,’ (1980,

p.168). This new form confronts us ‘with a *generalized fantastic* which swallows up the entire world of the book and the reader along with it,’ (Todorov, 1980, p.174).

In order to survive in the new conditions brought about by the epistemological upheavals of the early-twentieth century – the state of things often termed hyperreality – the fantastic has been forced to adapt. It has abandoned hesitation and grown voracious in order to retain its contestational force.

In the nineteenth century, the discourses of power asserted there existed a single objective reality whose phenomena could be understood by painstaking observation. Authority was cemented by a claim to be the sole mediator of this reality. The fantastic’s antagonistic function in that era was, through the hesitation at its heart, to draw attention to the way the act of perception alters that being perceived, and thus contest the axiom on which the hegemony of the elite rested.

Sometime in the early twentieth century, the tactics of the elite changed; their insistence on an absolute reality proving untenable, they conceded the subjectivity of observation. However, by a sleight, they nevertheless managed to retain their grip on power – they posited the existence of multifarious realities and appointed experts, each with their own special purview, to preside over them. This has caused the decay of the sign, for a single thing can now be referred to by many different terms depending on the field of the technocrat discussing it. Whereas previously the forces of hegemony claimed to directly express one true real, they now concoct divers makeshift reals; they no longer pretend to represent things as they were, but mask an essential lack with simulations. The voracious fantastic has the power to expose this perfidy.

Roland Barthes, in his essay ‘The Reality Effect’ (1968, original French title, ‘L’effet de réel’), describes the representational praxis of realism. In a key section he makes the following assertion:

[W]hen [descriptive details] are reputed to *denote* the real directly, all that they do – without saying so – is *signify* it [...] the very absence of the signified, to the advantage of the referent alone, becomes the very signifier of realism: the *reality effect* is produced, the basis of that unavowed verisimilitude which forms the aesthetic of all the standard works of modernity. (Barthes, 1989, p.148)

In Barthes' view, the fact passages of ecphrasis in post-Enlightenment mimetic texts are taken by their readers to signify reality is a pernicious convention that obscures the truth, which is that the texts denote, not the real directly, but reality filtered through an individual consciousness – descriptive details are assumed to refer directly to concrete things (referents), when what they actually refer to are mental conceptions (signifieds) of concrete things. This gives the fallacious impression the texts simply reproduce objective reality.

In the case of what could be termed marvellous narratives – fairy tales, myths, and fantasy novels – it is the referent that is elided; the fantastical nature of all their signifiers make it seem they denote mental concepts, signifieds, that have no basis in reality. The real world is excluded from the marvellous text, just as the subjective imagination is, from the mimetic. A marvellous narrative thus appears to be the direct expression of the writer's imagination, untroubled by history. Indeed, if history is read back into these texts it is always allegorically, they are only ever taken to be symbols of reality, not direct expressions of it.

Therefore, in the genres of realism and the marvellous, there seems, at least, to be a direct equivalence between thing – concrete object (referent) in the former's case, and mental concept (signified) in the latter's – and text (signifier): representation is simple. The voracious fantastic mode is a monstrous hybrid of the two forms that works to radically unsettle representation. Mimetic and marvellous discourses are mingled in the crucible of the fantastic by the irruption of the fantastic into a realist narrative. This produces texts in which the signified and the referent neutralize each other, leaving only the signifier (the word not tethered to any thing). This occurs because these texts give readers contradictory signals about the manner in which they should read. They end up confusing referents and signifieds – the

marvellous is construed as real, the mimetic as fantasy, the brain baulks, the sign is hollowed out. The voracious fantastic thus constitutes a radical challenge to representation, is aligned with a modern literary project described by Barthes:

[T]he goal today is to empty the sign and infinitely to postpone its object so as to challenge, in a radical fashion, the age-old aesthetic of “representation”. (Barthes, 1989, p.148)

The voracious fantastic makes manifest the fact the category of the real has been hollowed out, is maggoty at the core.<sup>xii</sup> This is something Frederic Jameson argues in *The Political Unconscious* (1981):

Thus, in the first great period of Bourgeois hegemony, the reinvention of romance finds its strategy in the substitution of new positivities (theology, psychology, the dramatic metaphor) for the older magical content. When, at the end of the nineteenth century, the search for secular equivalents seems exhausted, the characteristic indirection of a nascent modernism [...] circumscribes the place of the fantastic as a determinate, marked *absence* at the heart of the secular world. (Jameson, 2002, pp.120-121)

Horror is a special type of the fantastic, which, like the fantastic, once worked through hesitation, but now is voracious. In it the attack on representation is deepened by the failure of meaning evoked by abjection – as a result it is a potent mode for the interrogation for epistemological crises. However, horror’s evocation of abjection also means that, unlike the fantastic, it is not always contestational. The abjection evoked by horror raises the possibility that the marvellous which irrupts into the real can be ejected, that the boundaries of the real can be demarcated once more, and that all threats can be thrust without them. As a consequence, horror is a split mode, can be both contestational and affirmative.

## **The Origins of the Horror Form – A Ghost Haunting Official Culture**

The human race ceased to fear God. Then came its punishment; it began to fear itself, began to cultivate the fantastic, and now it trembles before this creature of its own imagination. (Kierkegaard, 1999, p.32)

Horror's origins lie in the Gothic romances of the latter half of the eighteenth century, in the epistemes of the Enlightenment era.

Medieval knowledge in the West conceived of the world as rigidly structured, with the place and purpose of everything pre-ordained and immutable – existence as a chain of being leading ultimately to God. The rise of the middle classes in Europe coincided with the emergence of an ideology which overturned this hierarchy of things. The idea of the world as an immutable concatenation was rejected. A taxonomical conception replaced it – things were categorised, divided into classes, on the basis of identity and difference. In disrupting the signifying chain of medieval thought, in creating the possibility of ectopia – for in the Middle Ages everything was always in the right place, where God had placed it – the ideologies of the Enlightenment gave rise to the modern experience of horror.

Repulsion became more readily engendered. While in the Middle Ages all things were manifestations of the divine will and nothing could contravene nature, with the Enlightenment the sciences partitioned the material realm into strictly demarcated categories. A corollary of this was that a thing could be repugnant by transgressing taxonomical divisions. As Noël Carroll notes:

[T]he [horror] genre presupposed something like an Enlightenment view of scientific reality in order to generate the requisite sense of a violation of nature. That is, the Enlightenment made available the kind of conception of nature or the kind of cosmology needed to create a sense of horror. (1990, p.57)

The uncanny emerged with the nascency of the epoch of rationality. It requires a prevailing ethos of scepticism, precedes from the derisive laughter of the Enlightenment at the beliefs of the benighted Middle Ages. Freud notes the uncanny nature of the modern fear of spectres (and, by extension, all other frighteningly transgressive entities) arises from the fact that '[r]epression is there [...] [a]ll supposedly educated people have ceased to believe officially that the dead can become visible as spirits,' (1955, p.242). It is only when humankind ceases to believe in the objective reality of awful beings these phenomena take on an uncanny aspect. Evil entities which are real according to the cosmology of an era are terrifying, merely – only something which contravenes an epoch's conception of the world is horrifying.

The ethos of the Enlightenment promoted mutability – the rigidly structured world of medieval doctrine was usurped by a model based on change; a monolithic Law was replaced by numerous laws that described and accounted for processes and transformations. The social impact of this was enormous. No longer was the trajectory of a life preordained, the tiller of a person's fate was in his or her hand (although, at the time under discussion, it is perhaps only entirely accurate to say *his* hand). The strictures of feudalism could be challenged under the new ideological system. This enabled the rise of a new merchant class.

The ascendancy of the bourgeoisie was bound up with the emergence of a new kind of cultural artefact, one that had a key role in promulgating the ideologies of the Enlightenment – the realist novel. Its form was ideal for disseminating the ideas of social fluidity and individual agency which were foundational principles of the new epoch, indeed the narratives of such works often chart the rise of a protagonist from poverty to social respectability.

When the merchant class had cemented their hegemony, however, they were seized by a desire to maintain their status, to hinder the emancipatory thinking they had previously espoused and from which they had benefited. This ideological shift involved the suppression of the realist novel, a cultural form whose potential to threaten social hierarchies persisted into the new era of the bourgeois elite. At that time a new kind of literature emerged – the Gothic.

The stark light of the Age of Reason cast deep shadows.

One claim that has been made about the original Gothic is that it was a literature that functioned to make the new hegemony of the merchant class appear more palatable in contrast to the feudal tyrannies it had replaced – that its exaggerated portrayal of the horrors of the Middle Ages existed to terrify readers into accepting the new liberal oligarchy, which appeared benign in comparison. Many Gothic tales narratively indicate the decadence and corruption of ancient regimes and contrast it with the purity of the middle classes. This often figures in hints of incest and imputations of depravity directed at aristocratic villains, and the shining goodness of a hero of humble birth who, significantly, is often revealed to be of noble lineage, and therefore positioned between the poles of poverty and the aristocracy – middle class, in other words.

It has also been argued that the Gothic was merely an expression of anxieties about the return of feudalism, the outbreak of a collective fear of historical regression felt by a society that construed the previous era as starkly dreadful, and saw themselves as essentially different and more civilised than their forebears.

Chris Baldick, in his introduction to *The Oxford Book of Gothic Tales* (1992), argues that Gothic literature is essentially anti-medieval. In his opinion the Gothic mode has an ‘ingrained distrust of medieval civilization [...] [and] represent[s] [...] the past primarily in terms of tyranny and superstition,’ (Baldick, 1992a, p.xiii). The term Gothic, for Baldick, denotes a barbaric surpassed culture:

In its earliest sense, the word is simply the adjective denoting the language and ethnic identity of the Goths [...] Long after they disappeared into the ethnic melting-pots of the northern Mediterranean, their fearful name was taken and used to prop up one side of that set of cultural oppositions by which the Renaissance and its heirs defined and claimed possession of European civilization: Northern versus Southern, Gothic versus Greaco-Roman, Dark Ages versus the Age of Enlightenment,

medieval versus modern, barbarity versus civility, superstition versus Reason.  
(Baldick, 1992a, xii)

The difficulty with Baldick's model is that it emphasises the manner in which the Gothic form supports Enlightenment rationality to an absurd degree. It implies Gothic novels evoked the supernatural solely to demonstrate the absurd irrationality of a belief in it. If this were true, all instances of the eldritch in Gothic tales would be rationalised – some, however, are left unexplained.

Furthermore, claims the Gothic romance was essentially anti-Gothic cannot account for the abhorrence which some proponents of Enlightenment rationality felt towards the fictions. As Fred Botting and Dale Townshend note in their general introduction to *Gothic* (2004), many contemporary critics of Gothic romances regarded them as discursive artefacts that could afflict, not just the mental, but also the physical health of a reader, contagions that unsettled even the Cartesian distinction between mind and body (a crucial principle of Enlightenment thought). They quote William Woodfall, who wrote, in *The Monthly Review* of July 1773, 'I have known persons of both sexes, whose constitutions would have been robust, weakened gradually by the strong impressions of impassioned writings,' (Botting and Townshend, 2004a, p.3).

Not all late-eighteenth-century critics saw the revival of the Gothic as a dangerously barbarous phenomenon, however. David Punter notes in *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day - Volume 1: The Gothic Tradition* (1996) that 'various writers [made] out a case for the importance of [...] Gothic qualities and [...] claim[ed], specifically, that the fruits of primitivism and barbarism possessed a fire, a vigour, a sense of grandeur which was sorely needed in English culture,' (1996a, p.5). Of course Gothic fiction 'mov[ed] beyond the more general Gothic revival in its devotion to the barbaric and the violent,' (Punter, 1996a, p.8). It still, though, possessed a sublimity that some saw as a desirable counter to the impassive rationality of the Enlightenment.



For these commentators, the Gothic revival was the resurgence of a native British tradition, an important cultural lineage. The Gothic was set, by these writers, in opposition to decadent alien ideologies:

Gothic [...] offers a positive historical framework in which the liberal political and religious values of a freedom-loving, Protestant and enlightened country can be given a continuity in opposition to Roman imports, whether these be political tyrannies, superstitious religious systems, or classical aesthetics. (Botting and Townshend, 2004a, p.9)

This can be seen in a number of features of the literature, perhaps most saliently in its persistent attacks on the Catholic Church – its frequent depictions of corrupt and cruel monks, nuns, and priests.

As the foregoing summary of receptions of Gothic fiction shows, the mode has been read in a number of seemingly conflicting ways: as a tradition evoking the dark ages to emphasise, by contrast, the beneficence of the post-Enlightenment bourgeois regime; as an eruption of fears of a return to a supposed medieval barbarism; as a popular, tawdry literature that evoked folklore and superstition in the service of sensation, and had a deleterious effect on the bodies and minds of readers; as the literary arm of a revival that restored a much needed vigour to the wan culture of reason; and as a tradition that emphasised the continuity of a northern-European mythos, superior to Classical decadence.

This web of interpretations appears contradictory. At first glance it would appear absurd to suggest they all contain a grain of truth. And yet that is precisely the case. A coherent function can be assumed from these diverse responses. Gothic literature rejected the oppressive, rigid hierarchies and the decadence of the aristocracy, while, at the same time, weakening the principle of social flux that defined the moment of the Enlightenment; it established a uniquely British culture under which the nation could be united; and it reintroduced the sublime and made it compatible with a humanist ethos. Therefore, the Gothic

contributed to bringing about the circumstances which saw the rise of capitalism: it opposed a return to feudalism that would have stifled enterprise and commerce; promoted a social stability that allowed the rich to stay rich; enabled the creation of the sense of nationhood required for international trade; and reintroduced to the object the mystical significance pure reason had deprived it of – a mysticism crucial to any creed of exchange value.

However, just as some realist novels retained their contestational effect after the period of the mode's usefulness to the newly emerged bourgeoisie had passed, something the liberal hegemony saw as threatening, some Gothic texts remained antagonistic following the establishment of modern capitalism, the result of which was that they depredated the epistemological conditions their precursors had fostered. Some Gothic novels became dark others – ghosts haunting official culture. These fictions are those in which the Gothic element is not finally overthrown.

The Gothic was a mode of literature in which an encounter with an other representing the perceived violence and squalor of the Middle Ages gave rise to horror. Over time the collective fear of medieval barbarism faded. The mode did not become extinct, however, but mutated to express other social anxieties. The Gothic was the first expression of the literature of horror.

The salient consequence of horror's general narrative structure and mode of operating – which are a legacy of the conditions, described above, that gave rise to it – is that it is an essentially bifurcated mode. Put simply, there are conservative texts in which the other is defeated, and contestational, transgressive texts in which the other overwhelms the real.

## Horror and Ideology

Horror can be either radical and transgressive, or reactionary and affirmative of hegemonic ideologies. In this it is unlike the modern fantastic, which, as Rosemary Jackson argues in her *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (1981), will always disrupt the symbolic order:

The modern fantastic, the form of literary fantasy within the secularized culture produced by capitalism, is a subversive literature [...] By attempting to transform the relations between the imaginary and the symbolic, fantasy hollows out the 'real', revealing its absence, its 'great Other', its unspoken and its unseen. (1981, p.180)

Horror texts are dissimilar to fantastic works in this respect because they evoke abjection, and thus raise the possibility that their others can be repulsed, thrust without the borders of the 'real'. However, those horrors that are contestational, in which the other corrupts the 'real', are more potent than fantastic texts, because the anomalous appeal of the abject increases the reader's disconcertion by troubling his or her desire.

Many horror tales, though, are affirmative, and it is for this reason that Stephen King can assert that the 'main purpose [of horror literature] is to reaffirm the virtues of the norm by showing us what awful things happen to people who venture into taboo lands,' (King, 1981, p.386).

At the end of his survey of the genre, in *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day - Volume 2: The Modern Gothic* (1996), David Punter offers the following definition of the Gothic:

[T]he Gothic has defined itself on the borderland of [hegemonic] culture. Sometimes [...] fear of the outside in the end submits to the reassurance of contact with the interior; elsewhere the dark predominates, and the bourgeoisie loses the imaginary battles which Gothic acts out. (1996b, pp.196-197)

This is applicable to horror in general – particular texts will either support the rational flow of bourgeois history, or perturb it depending on whether, in the narrative, the ‘real’ succumbs to the assaults of the other, or fends them off.

### **Slouching Towards Bethlehem**

And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,  
 Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?  
 (Yeats, 1994, p.159)

While conservative horrors function to support the entrenchment of dominant ideologies, transgressive horror texts are grimoires – they contain incantations that act upon things in the world, transform them, they are charged with animism. But they are contestational, not progressive fictions; they gesture towards an unknown, a terrifying void, but offer no alternatives, no solutions to spiralling disintegration.

In its original manifestation, in the early Gothic of the latter half of the eighteenth century, all horror texts were of the contestational type, but their mutative sorcery was then directed at a legitimate object, the mode had a hegemonic function – it was bound up with the epistemological project which brought about the conditions necessary for modern capitalism. Gothic narratives were part of a bourgeois project that strove to check the social fluidity of the Enlightenment, foster a sense of British national identity, and reconfer upon objects the talismanic aura they had been deprived of by the doctrines of reason, make of them secular fetishes, inscribe useless things with a mystical attraction that would charm people into purchasing them despite their inutility. These operations were necessarily tentative, circumspect, for the merchant class sought to achieve their aims without reintroducing the numinous feudal world, with its rigid hierarchies, something that would have damaged the

figure that had sprung up at the heart of Enlightenment thought, the central mythotype of modernity, the mutable self-defining individual subject, a myth without which people could not be transformed into consumers. Fred Botting, in his article, 'Signs of Evil: Bataille, Baudrillard and Postmodern Gothic' (2004), describes how the original Gothic literature achieved this aim:

As an awful and obscure threat to subjectivity, rationality and comprehension, the immensity of the sublime object evoked emotions of terror that elevated the subject, enabling it to overcome its imagined disintegration and reconstitute itself and its reality. (Botting, 2004, p.319)

In the original Gothic texts the abject was always ejected, cast without the frontiers of the real. After the birth of the new episteme of commerce, however, in some books the Gothic topoi began to corrode the very conditions they had helped found:

A horror remains, to be developed by later, more Romantic Gothic writing: the horror of the utter dissolution of boundaries and disintegration of self in an endless, nightmarish play of appearances, realities and signs. (Botting, 2004, p.320)

The conditions were then in place that led to the emergence of the contestational horror, the form which was the dark other of capitalism's bright promise, that hinted at the secret vices of the institutions of value, at their insatiability and delirium, the hunger for profit and surplus they are unable to restrain, the commodifying drive which has finally consumed everything and rendered all equally worthless. Of course, not all horrors took this form, the literature was radically split. Horrors subsequently occupied one or other of two antithetical positions – either supporting capitalism and the bourgeois ethos, or gesturing towards their ultimate collapse.

Then, in the West, towards the end of the twentieth century, everything changed.

Bourgeois capitalism was eviscerated, hollowed out by its own rapaciousness. Its soil had already been showing signs of over-exploitation, was less fertile than it had been. This led to desperate speculation at increasingly absurd removes from commodities, which finally rendered the epistemological ground utterly barren – now virtually nothing of value (commercial, intellectual, aesthetic, and so on) can be grown in it. But capitalism had one last ruse – rather than attempting to deny its infecundity, the absence at its core, it has made a virtue of this void, it, wily that it is, has staged its own death, and, by this stratagem, guaranteed its survival. The institution is much less vulnerable now as a rotting corpse than it was when alive. Baudrillard discusses this in his essay, ‘The Spiraling Cadaver’, found in *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981, original French title, *Simulacres et Simulation*):

Surrounded by the *simulacrum* of value and by the *phantom* of capital and of power, we are much more disarmed and impotent than when surrounded by the *law* of value and of the commodity. (1994c, p.153)

Formerly, contestational horrors could function antagonistically by illustrating the void at the core of representation. Now they can only collude with the symbolic order – the forces of hegemony no longer seek to conceal the crisis, but admit it with an apologetic shrug and a disingenuous melancholy smile, like papier-mâché Mephistopheleses. By admitting culpability the regime deflects criticism, becomes inviolable.

Late-capitalist hegemony compels belief by virtue of a reversal: whereas before institutions extorted faith as the price for the revelation of a spurious hidden truth at the heart of things, they now display the hollowness of the real with mock solemnity. Those living in the epoch of simulation can no longer either support the regime or contest it, and, therefore, feel the burden of responsibility lifted from them. But this liberation from care masks new, even more powerful strictures – when capital had tangible worth people were enslaved to the

production of value, something that was at least vital, now they are in thrall to a worthless system because it asks nothing of them, this is an apathy akin to death.

Under these conditions the figure of the horrifying other has been deprived of its potential to disquiet, subvert, because it previously did so by challenging orthodox systems of representation, something which is now pointless:

Attacking representation no longer has much meaning [...] Through I don't know what Möbius effect, representation itself has [...] turned in on itself, and the whole logical universe of the political is dissolved at the same time, ceding its place to a transfinite universe of simulation. (Baudrillard, 1994c, p.152)

The horrifying other can therefore no longer either provoke a conservative reaction to its assault on the real, or contest the real, for the real itself is dead and decaying.

Though it might be futile, it is still important to harry the preternaturally animate carrion of the institutions of power, and representation remains the arena of conflict: 'it is there that one must fight,' (Baudrillard, 1994c, p.152). Antagonistic horrors can be potent weapons in this fight, due to the intensity an admixture of abjection gives transgression. When the abject is present in a narrative, but is not abjected, the possibility of the myriad possible others of the realm of the imagination being loosed to wreak havoc upon reality is evoked. Fictions that do this are contestational, because:

Contestation does not imply a generalized negation, but an affirmation that affirms nothing [...] [it] is the act which carries [existences or values] to their limits and, from there, to the Limit where an ontological decision achieves its end; to contest is to proceed until one reaches the empty core where being achieves its limit and where the limit defines being. (Foucault, 1977, p.36)

Contestational horror can refuse negation – can mount a challenge to the orthodoxy of complacency through its permissiveness. Its encounter with the fantastic other can carry its

readers to a pure experience of limits. Kristeva claims knowing the abject, ‘with a knowledge undermined by forgetfulness and laughter, an abject knowledge,’ will prepare the individual ‘to go through the first great demystification of Power (religious, moral, political, and verbal) that mankind has ever witnessed,’ (Kristeva, 1982, p.210). Literature has the power to force its readers to experience the abject:

Because it occupies [the] place [of the sacred], because it hence decks itself out in the sacred power of horror, literature may also involve not an ultimate resistance to but an unveiling of the abject. (Kristeva, 1982, p.208)

In this sense all literature is horrifying. However, it is the literature of horror which can force its readers to confront the abject in its most dreadful and threatening manifestations. Horror can do this by radically transgressing the limits of culture’s epistemological and ontological territories. Its task is now to shake its readers from their moribund apathy by making them feel anew a sense of peril:

We may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens [sic] it – on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger. (Kristeva, 1982, p.9)

### Notes

<sup>i</sup> The term chronotope is taken from Einstein’s Theory of Relativity. Bakhtin uses it ‘almost as a metaphor (almost, but not entirely),’ to express the ‘intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships [...] artistically expressed in literature,’ (1981, p.84).

<sup>ii</sup> [It may be noted horror narratives themselves are the absent others of these meditations – textual evidence is rarely cited, and then only in vague, elliptical asides. It is as if, in this piece of analytic writing, Peterkin wished to proceed in a manner analogous to that in which,



he asserts, horror does – by allowing the texts to exist only beyond the limits of representation, as he argues the objects of horror do in the fictions themselves – Anderson.]

<sup>iii</sup> The genre ‘corrupted’ by the horror mode can be one of any number: there are horror fantasies, horror detective narratives, horror war stories, horror westerns, and so forth.

However, horror is most effective, most disturbing, as further analysis will demonstrate, when it irrupts into a realist narrative.

<sup>iv</sup> Realist narratives, myths, fairy tales, and other narrower genres such as the Western have, to a greater or lesser degree, times and places which are proper to them. This is also true of certain kinds of fantasy narratives – those accompanied by meticulous maps and elaborate chronologies.

<sup>v</sup> In fact Svankmajer’s film is not horror at all, but an experimental piece indebted to surrealism. There are, however, a number of points of contact between surrealism and horror. In ‘Limits Not Frontiers of Surrealism’ (1936, original French title, ‘Limites non frontières du surréalisme’) André Breton makes the following claims:

Surrealism proposes to express [an age’s] latent content [...] The ‘fantastic’ [...] constitutes in our view the supreme key to this latent content, the means of fathoming the secret depths of history which disappear beneath a maze of events. It is only at the approach of the fantastic, at a point where human reason loses its control, that the most profound emotion of the individual has the fullest opportunity to express itself: emotion unsuitable for projection in the framework of the real world and which has no other solution in its urgency than to rely on the eternal solicitation of symbols and myths. (1971, p.106)

The fantastic, as conceptualised by Breton here, closely resembles the horror mode as described in this treatise.

<sup>vi</sup> Interestingly, Douglas’s monograph is also a key text for Kristeva in her formulation of the concept of abjection.

vii The temptation is to say ‘more Poe-tically’.

viii This recalls abjection. Indeed abjection is not just associated with fear, but also with *jouissance* (bliss):

One does not know [the abject], one does not desire it, one joys in it [*on en jouit*].  
Violently and painfully. A passion. (Kristeva, 1982, p.9)

ix That such a exploration might enlighten as to the nature of the effect of horror fictions, is suggested by the fact that Deleuze and Guattari used both H.P Lovecraft’s oeuvre, and the horror film *Willard* as exempla in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980, original French title, *Capitalisme et Schizophrénie 2: Mille Plateaux*).

<sup>x</sup> This attack on, and rejection of the maternal language, the Mother tongue, evokes abjection once more.

<sup>xi</sup> It is for this reason that in horror fictions in which the object of horror is superficially a real phenomenon, a serial killer for example, it will always possess some kind of preternatural attribute.

<sup>xii</sup> It is easy to see why the fantastic as described by Todorov was a forerunner to these kinds of texts. But rather than amalgamate the mimetic and the marvellous they vacillated between them, calling into question the notion of an objective reality, but not causing the collapse of the sign, interrogating representation itself.

### Appendix III

#### Photographs of *The Wanderer's* Key Locations with Peterkin's Original Comments



A derelict ship on the Thames Estuary



A wizard entertains tourists on James Street



The heathen obelisk of Christ Church  
Spitalfield's spire





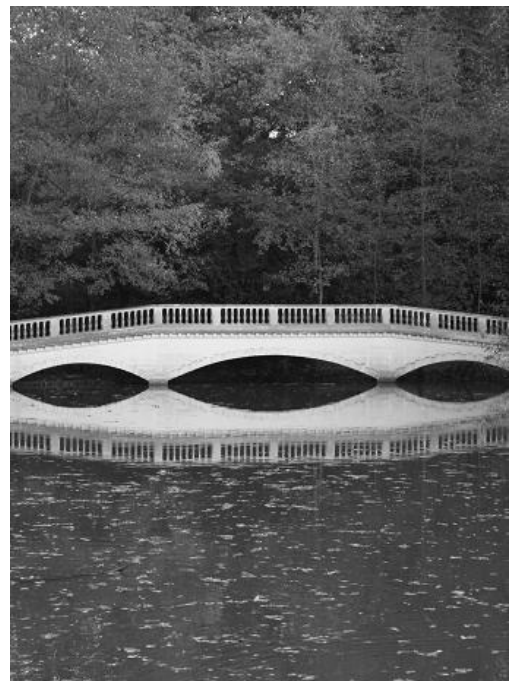
A gathering on the summit of Parliament Hill



A chestnut tree on Hampstead Heath



The hoary edifice of Kenwood House



Painted wood shamming



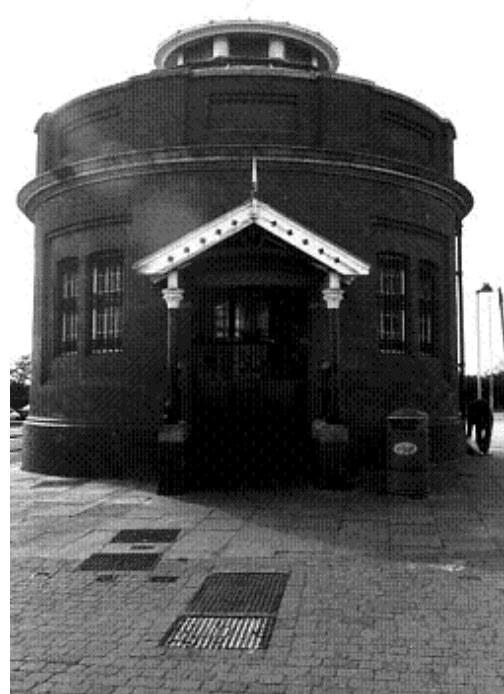
The Thames Barrier – a crash-landed spaceship



Barrier Park fountain – now defunct

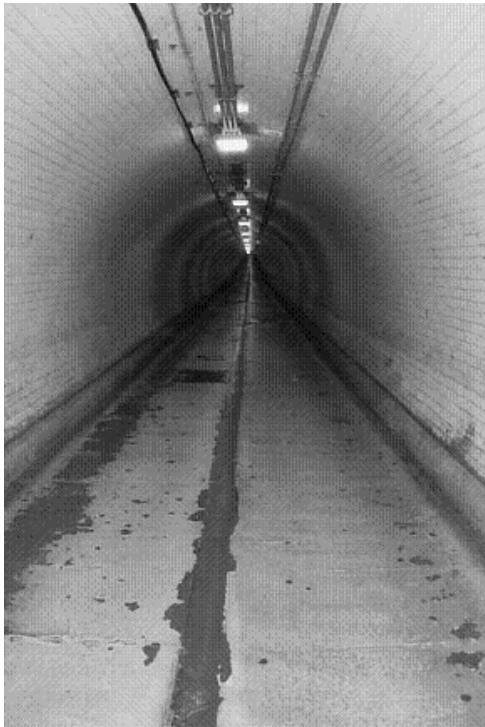


Motes of sunlight flittering  
gleeful on the chop



The north entrance to the  
Woolwich Foot Tunnel





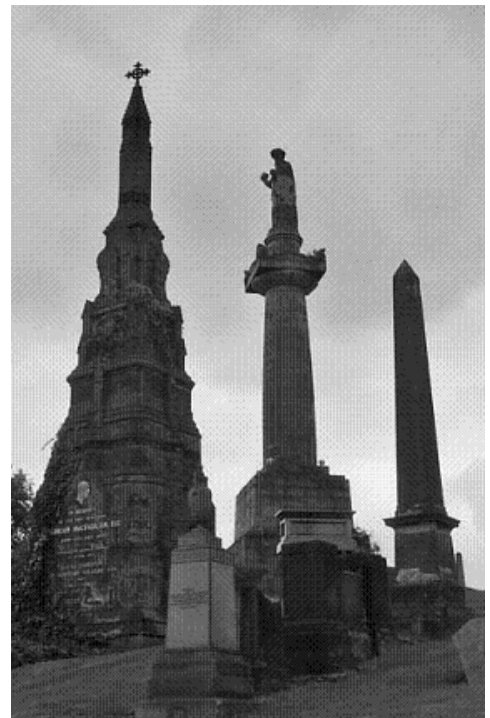
Inside the Woolwich Foot Tunnel



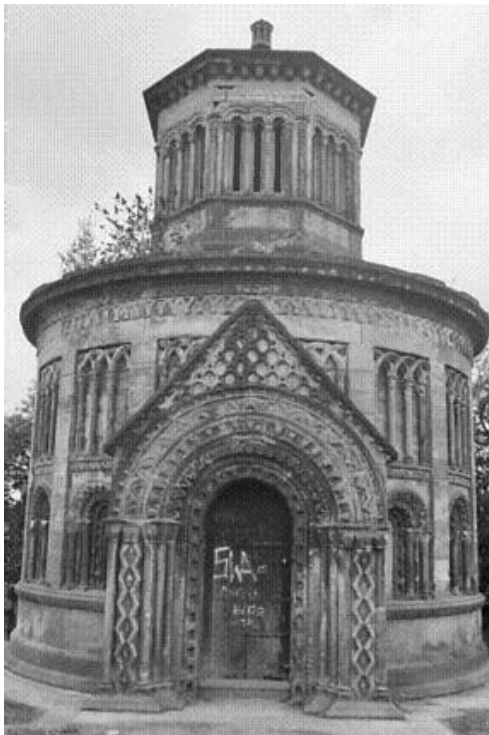
The Great Eastern Hotel



Park Circus



Pious Stylite John Knox



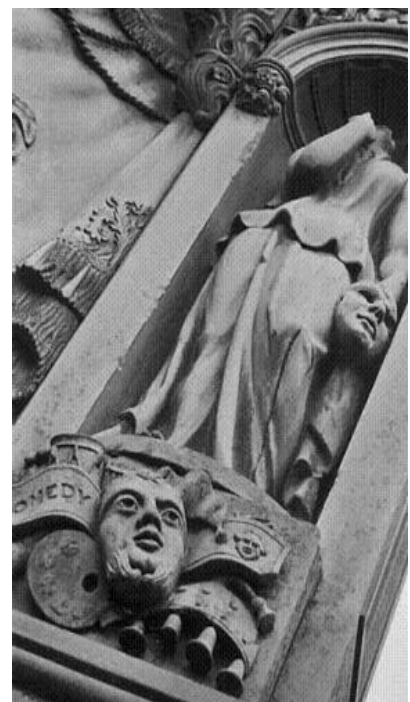
Major Monteath's Mausoleum



Glasgow Cathedral



Sculpture of war hero Lieutenant-Colonel Alexander Hope Pattison



Monument to commemorate the life of John Henry Alexander



Beyond the column lay two sepulchres  
next to each other



A sculpture of a woman wearing a  
crown, flanked by angels at prayer



Thy Saints take pleasure in her  
stones and favour the dust thereof



The Trossachs



## Appendix IV

### A List of the Books Found on the Shelves in Peterkin's Study at the Time of His Disappearance and Other Miscellanea \*

#### Novels, Dramatic Works, Poetry Collections, and Anthologies of Short Fiction

Abe, K., 2006 (1964). *The Face of Another (Tanin No Kao)*, trans. E. Saunders, with an introduction by K. Nagai, Penguin Modern Classics. London: Penguin.

Ackroyd, P., 1993 (1985). *Hawksmoor*. London: Penguin.

Ackroyd, P., 2000 (1999). *The Plato Papers*. London: Vintage.

[Anon.], 1973. *The Penguin Tales from the Thousand and One Nights*, trans. with an introduction by N. Dawood, reprinted 1985. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin.

[Anon.], 2000 (trans. 1838-1846). *The Mabinogion*, trans. with notes by C. Guest, illustrated and with an introduction by A. Lee. London: Harper Collins.

Baldick, C. (ed.), 1992b. *The Oxford Book of Gothic Tales*, with an introduction by C. Baldick. New York: Oxford University Press.

\* [Anderson only provided authors and titles of works, information on editions has been compiled by this editor. Therefore, the dates of some editions referred to here are subsequent to Peterkin's disappearance – *Editor*.]

Ballard, J., 1966 (1962). *The Drowned World*. New York: Berkley Medallion Books.

Ballard, J., 1993 (1966). *The Crystal World*. London: Flamingo.

Ballard, J., 1994 (1981). *Hello America*. London: Vintage.

Ballard, J., 2002. *The Complete Short Stories*. London: Flamingo.

Banks, I., 1990 (1984). *The Wasp Factory*, 22<sup>nd</sup> reprint, 2005. London: Abacus.

Baricco, A., 2002 (1999). *City*, trans. A. Goldstein. London: Penguin.

Barker, C., 1989 (1988). *Cabal: The Nightbreed*. London: Collins.

Barker, C., 1991 (1984). *Books of Blood: Volume I*, with an introduction by R. Campbell.  
London: Macdonald & Co. Ltd.

Barker, C., 2000. *The Essential Clive Barker*, foreword by A. Maupin. London: Harper  
Collins.

Barth, J., 1988 (1968). *Lost in the Funhouse: Fiction for Print, Tape, Live Voice*. New York:  
Doubleday.

Baudelaire, C., 1993b (1857). *The Flowers of Evil (Les Fleurs du mal)*, trans. with notes by J. McGowan, with an introduction by J. Culler, Oxford World's Classics, reissued 1998. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Beckett, S., 1957. *All that Fall: A Play for Radio*. London: Faber and Faber.

Beckett, S., 1959b (1950, 1951, 1952). *Trilogy: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable (Molloy, Malone Meurt, L'Innomable)*, 5th reprint, 1997. London: Calder Publications.

Beckett, S., 1976 (1953). *Watt*, reprinted 1998. London: John Calder.

Beckett, S., 1993a (1934). *More Pricks than Kicks*. London: John Calder.

Beckett, S., 1993b (1938). *Murphy*, reprinted 1998. London: John Calder.

Beckford, W., 1983 (1786). *Vathek*, ed. with an introduction by R. Lonsdale, The World's Classics. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bishop, K., 2004. *The Etched City*. London: Tor.

Blackwood, A., 1964 (1906-1910). *Selected Tales*. London: John Baker.

Blake, W., 1996. *Selected Poems*, Penguin Popular Classics. London: Penguin.

Borges, J., 1970d (1962). *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, ed. D. Yates and J. Irby, trans. D. Yates, J. Irby, et al., preface by A. Maurois. London: Penguin.

Borges, J., 1998a (1970). *Brodie's Report*, trans. A. Hurley. London: Penguin.

Borges, J., 2001a (1975, 1986). *The Book of Sand and Shakespeare's Memory*, trans. A. Hurley. London: Penguin.

Borges, J., 2004 (1935). *A Universal History of Infamy (Historia universal de la infamia)*, trans. with an introduction by M. Hurley, Penguin Classics. New York: Penguin.

Breton, A., 1999 (1928). *Nadja*, trans. R. Howard, with an introduction by M. Polizzotti. London: Penguin.

Brontë, C., 1980 (1847). *Jane Eyre*, ed. with an introduction by M. Smith, The World's Classics, reset 1993. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bulgakov, M., 2004 (completed 1938). *The Master and Margarita*, trans. M. Glenny, Vintage Classics. London: Vintage.

Burroughs, W., 1982 (1981). *Cities of the Red Night*. London: Picador.

Burroughs, W., 1987. *The Western Lands*. London: Picador.

Burroughs, W., 1995 (1983). *The Place of Dead Roads*. New York: Henry Holt.

Calvino, I., 1977 (1969). *The Castle of Crossed Destinies (Il castello dei destini incrociati)*, trans. W. Weaver, Vintage Classics. London: Vintage.

Calvino, I., 1997a (1972). *Invisible Cities (Le cita invisibili)*, trans. W. Weaver, Vintage Classics. London: Vintage.

Calvino, I., 1998 (1980). *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller (Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore)*, trans. W. Weaver, Vintage Classics. London: Vintage.

Carter, A., 1982 (1977). *The Passion of New Eve*, 19<sup>th</sup> reprint. London: Virago.

Carter, A., 1994 (1984). *Nights at the Circus*, Vintage Classics. London: Vintage.

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